journey to the past

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僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

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Class 1-A & Midoriya Izuku

Character:
Midoriya Izuku, Uraraka Ochako, Todoroki Shouto, Bakugou Katsuki, Iida Tenya, Aoyama Yuuga, Shinsou Hitoshi, Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead

Additional Tags:
Friendship, Cute Midoriya Izuku, Hurt/Comfort, References to bullying, Time Travel, every class 1-A student makes an appearence, plus shinsou - Freeform, Protective Class 1-A (My Hero Academia), Class 1-A as Family (My Hero Academia)

Language:
English

Collections:
fics that cured ser's depression, Tales of Class 1-A, Pickys MHA Favorites, The Last Rec List, I'll re-read anytime, Excellent Completed Gen & Platonic Fiction, best fics <3, The deku that tries, Best of My Hero Academia, Boku no Hero Academia, best fic collection ever read, best yet brand canned peaches, Suggested Good Reads, Boku No Hero Academia Stories, FTTN's Favorites, HighQualityBNHAFics, A Labyrinth of Fics, Time Travel Fun, The Best MHA Fics Ever, I Sorted Through Shit And Found Gold, Fics I Reread to the Nth Degree, fics that hit different, Time Travel Fics

That Water My Crops, Best Fics From Across The Multiverse, Anodyne fics, It’s 2 a.m. and I’m gonna read it again (cuz once wasn’t enough), Real Good Shit, Typsy's Dragon Hoard, Astral_Phoenix108's Library, Creative Chaos Discord Recs, hey_look_at_all_these_hidden_gems, TWT FIC REC CHAT, fics that made me feel Things, Behold the Sacred Texts, all them recs, escapism (to forget that the world is a burning hellscape), Completed stories I've read, Read it and weep, "no writing academia" discord recs, These are the best written fanfics I've ever read, Long Fics to Binge, Best of our resident gremlins✧, The Collection From the Clouds, BNHA Books I Recommend Out Of My Heart, Fanfics I’d eat again at 3 am and already have, Fav MHA long fic recs, Good Gen Oneshots & Short Stories, The best fics out there, Histórias topzinhas, completed and read, Free serotonin! Come get your free serotonin!, Best of the best fanfics, Fanfiction Masterpieces, Mha heart mah soul, Pacing's bests, consider this your oscar, Best Written Stories, BNHA fics I'd recommend to people who don't read fanfiction, Quality Fics, FAVOURITE BNHA FANFICS, One For All For All, My Time Travel Academia, Mellow's Five Star Fics, Cloudy with a Chance of great fics, I'm Gonna Rec It, fics i wanna hold hands with, Heaven (Angel’s Fic List), Sturgeon's Fuck You, Midoriya (and others ig) being BAMF and Intelligent, Bunny’s corner discord recs!, bnha fics i dream about 🌙, Don’t Forget These Fics, Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, love and big apprish to the writers and betas of these pieces, its-yaboijojo Read Later/Favorites, my favorite bnha fics, Skelebooks (The Graveyard), My heart is full, ☆My Hero Stories Worth Your Time☆, Lady's collection of PERFECT fics., bnha fics☆, Fanfiction ***I*** Deem Worthy Of The Name, 💔My Hero Stories That Made Me Cry💔, ✧Absolute All-Time Faves✧, short stories to die for, Se eu perde-las, Bnha timetravel fics, 🍀GOAT FICS feat: My Hero Izuku🍀, Purple Archivist: Read and Read Again, I don't know what to name this collection, Road to Nowhere Discord Recs, Reread And Revisit, complete works BNHA (Izuku' centric), The Hall™, Best Completed Stories, A Picky Vest's Favorites, hmm I guess I'll just cry about it (BNHA), Books I'd recommend - Queen of Kings YT, Best Fics I’ve ever Read, the perfect fic doesn't exi-, miQ_y's fav fav fics, Taste, great fics from all fandoms :), fics i can and will stay up to 3am to re-read, The Best of BNHA Fics for Picky Readers, Flower Dragon's Recommendation, Completed BNHA Fics, fuckin' mint, S.T.I.L.L., Long_fics, Books that I love 🫂, 💯(a 100) good reasons to scream at 3 a.m. 💯, Wonderful bnha fics, Quirkless Izuku and Consequences and Adult Bashing and Parental Pros, Our Hero Academia!, the bnha icebin, craftyreader_favs, Ripon’s Fanfic Recs, BNHA Fics that

cured my cancer, absolute favorites, The Very Best Complete MHA Plus Ultra Fics, Flashfreeze Recs, i've read this 14 hundred times, bnha fics I love, McNanas' Recommends, rainy day longfic <3, Worth It BNHA Fanfics Reading List - Completed, Best, BNHA fics that give me a will to live, ✧˖°I don't have a personal life✧˖°, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, Jwllz Favorite BNHA Fics (Completed Works), Autiser's Favorites, Kai's Eclectic Collection of Fics, BNHA TikTok Recs That Were Actually Good, BNHA Fanfiction Archive, Pie collection, Nohn's Favorites, Fics for D-Nasty, oh YES, Tiktok_recommended, BNHA_Fics_to_Read_Later, 🐬Aman_ita's read works🐬, grey_cosplay's tiktok MHA fic recs, Izuku is a shine, A badass izuku with 99 issues (seriously is a rabbit with a knife)🩶, From the Vault, late night reads, Fics that Prove Fanfic is an Art, My Hero Academia fics that caused my insomnia (in a good way), Get Recc'd, Sansthepacifist's favorite fics, wxrds' serotonin :), The Eternal Crack Server Fic Rec Collection, MHA works that make me happy this site exists, Posible future book binding, FicsforKrusti, *slaps fic* i'm gonna reread this so many times I need it on hot key, LadyRaphael's Favorite Stories, Time/Dimension Travel, These fics emotionally wrecked me, 📚 Fanfic Forum Discord Recs, Ace's Favorite FIcs, Eatbook's Cherished and wanting more All Fandoms, BNHA Top Tier, Library of the Best Written, WOO Insomnia Time, 🍉Melon's heart is held hostage by these wonderful fics🍉, Meet the 1-A family!, ✧*。 fics so perfect that they change the definition of perfection (๑′ᴗ‵๑) ✧*。, puu, Free Dopamine ✧□□✧□, Timey Whimey, time-loops! time-loops! time-loops! (read like mulaney's mcdonald's chant), Time or Space Travel, Shit worth rereading, Tia's BNHA OGs and Good Reads, My appreciation for the author to serve the best characters and plot, Saved the Best for Last, MHA Favs, my heart is here, Lovely reads I've done read, food for my soul, Why I ❤□ ao3, mha fics that are my will to live, Carries Bookshelf, Multifandom fics that have caressed my damaged soul, So Much Talent on AO3, My Favorite MHA Fanfics, Orbit's Fics To Reread, bunnies' favorite fics, My Bookshelf, just the best time/dimensional travel fics, good ol' fashioned fluff (and some crack and whump) for the BNHA soul, Selected Best Reads, My Entire History, 🍉 ✧˖°Absolute Gems✧˖° 🍉, fics i would download again and again, Best fluff and Angst, Fanfics that I hoard, Bnha fics that give me a reason to live™ <3, AO3 Amazing, under penalty of death, like clockwork, Fics to hyperfixate on, ✧˖° number one problem child ✧˖°

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journey to the past

by aloneintherain

Summary

Izuku is five years old the first time he's saved by heroes. He's an instant fan of the woman in pink with her cheerful smile and the man with his ice powers and fine-boned features, even if they both refuse to tell him their names.

For most of his life, Izuku has been the centre of villain attacks, but he has never been injured. Every time, he's saved by bright, unknown heroes—heroes who smile at Izuku, and ruffle his hair or ply him with hugs, and seem mesmerised by how small he is.

Heroes that the rest of the world doesn't believe exists.

(Time-travelling Class 1-A AU)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Izuku is five the first time he's saved by a hero.

He has been quirkless for six months. Really, he's been quirkless his whole life—most people, like Kacchan, like all the kids in his class, had a quirk laying dormant under their skin, waiting to unfurl, but not Izuku. He never had anything waiting. That part of his DNA was missing. Broken, Kacchan said. Izuku was broken.

But he hasn't stopped loving heroes. He lives and breathes heroes, remembers them all, but he's never seen *these* heroes before.

Izuku is walking home from school. He doesn't hear the heavy thud of the villain landing on asphalt, but he does feel a hand tap him on the head. His feet lift off and he floats into the air. He flails his arms like a bird. Without gravity's influence, he pinwheels through the air, squealing.

The sidewalk ices over. Steam wafts off the sheets of ice.

Izuku flaps his hands and turns in a circle in mid-air. There are a man and a woman standing behind him. The man has two-toned hair and stands tall and regal like some kind of prince. The woman wears a pale pink jumpsuit. She has a nice smile. She waves at him, almost giddy, and Izuku waves back.

The man commands ice with ease. The woman doesn't look at whatever has the man so focused, so intense. Instead, she keeps smiling at Izuku like he's made her whole day.

Izuku spins himself around again and—

There's a giant villain in the middle of the street. Izuku doesn't recognise him. He knows he's a villain, because he has a mean snarl and he's brandishing an even meaner bouquet of knives. The prince-like hero ices him to the ground without moving from his place across the street.

When the villain is completely trapped, the woman runs over. She says, "Release!" and Izuku falls out of the air and into her arms. She squeals against his hair. "Oh, you're so cute. And so *small*."

“You’re going to scare him,” says the man.

“No way.” The woman pulls away from the tight hold just enough to look Izuku in the eyes. “I bet he loves hugs. Right? Do you love hugs?”

Izuku nods, eyes wide. The woman squeals again and pulls him to her chest.

“Put him down,” says the man.

“You’re just jealous. I bet you want to hug him, too.”

“… Maybe.”

Izuku doesn’t know what’s happening. He’s in shock, he thinks. An awed kind of shock. He just saw two heroes take down a villain he hadn’t even realised was there. They’re here—in person, and not on TV or on YouTube like every other hero fight he’s watched on a loop. The heroes are solid and real, and one of them is hugging Izuku tightly.

The woman sets him down on the ground and Izuku grabs her hand to stop her from leaving. “Can I have your autographs? You were so awesome. You jumped in there like, Bam! Take this! Ice! And you grabbed me and floated me up like I weighed nothing. Your quirks are so cool, and I love your costumes, and I’ve never seen you before, but—but I’m a fan now—!”

The two stare at him. Izuku digs into his backpack and grabs his exercise book and a blue marker. He holds both up, and then remembers his manners. “Please?”

The woman presses her hand against her cheek. Her eyes are wet. The man looks at Izuku like he’s trying to stop himself from scooping him up and carrying him away.

Izuku lowers his book. An apology is on the tip of his tongue, but the woman jumps forward and yanks the marker out of his hands in her haste to sign his book. The man signs it with the same intensity he had iced over the villain trying to sneak up on Izuku. He looks faintly constipated.

Izuku clutches the book to his chest. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I want to be a hero too, one day. Even though—”

Izuku cuts himself off. In the weeks after he found out he was

quirkless, neighbours came up to him and his mum and offered their condolences, like Izuku had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, rather than pronounced quirkless. He had never been popular at school, but the kids inched away from him, as though he smelt funny. And this woman had hugged him and smiled so widely at him—he doesn't want to see her face drop when she hears that Izuku is quirkless.

Something strange flickers over their faces. The man looks constipated again. The woman says, choked, "I think you'd make a great hero."

"Don't lose hope," says the man.

Izuku runs all the way home, book pressed to his chest. Mum panics when he tells her about the villain that almost attacked him, and says to walk to school with Kacchan and some of the other kids in the neighbourhood. Izuku promises to, even though Kacchan usually just tells him to get lost when he trails after him.

Mum also helps him boot up the computer and look up the names of the heroes who saved him. Izuku wants to stock up on their merchandise. Mum would let him. She helps facilitate his love for All Might, and these heroes had personally saved his life, after all.

With help from Mum, Izuku types in, *Floaty hero.* Nothing comes up. He tries, *Ice hero; pair heroes; two-toned hair; anti-gravity hero; new heroes.*

Nothing. Lots of heroes have elemental or gravity quirks, but none of them are the heroes Izuku met today.

"Are you sure you're remembering correctly?" Mum asks. "Are you sure they didn't give their names? What do their autographs say?"

For the first time, Izuku opens up his exercise book. In blue marker, one hero has written:

To my favourite fan,

It was wonderful meeting you. Plus Ultra! You can do it!

Izuku thinks the woman in pink wrote that. The other note must be from the ice hero. It simply says, *Stay strong.*

It is signed, *Your friends.*

There are no names.

Izuku knows the two heroes that saved him, even if the world doesn't. He pulls out his hero journal and draws them beside All Might. Izuku applies the lightest of pressure with a pink pencil to capture the woman's pastel costume. *Floaty Girl,* he calls her. She's his friend, she said so, and it would be rude to keep calling her "the pink lady." Floaty Girl is a great hero name.

He calls the other hero *Ice Prince,* because he's prince-like with his quiet seriousness and handsome face. Izuku pays special attention to the Ice Prince's long hair when he draws him. He makes sure to include the discoloured splotch on his face that Mum says is probably a birthmark or scar when Izuku describes it.

He doesn't manage to capture the man's fine-bonded features no matter how many times he tries. The Ice Prince is much prettier in person. Izuku makes sure to tell Mum that when she looks at his drawings, because for some reason, that seems like an important detail, and she laughs and calls his crush cute.

"I don't have a crush," Izuku says, puffing out his cheeks. "They're my friends."

"Of course, I understand," Mum says in a way that makes Izuku think she doesn't actually understand at all.

The teacher calls the heroes his *imaginary friends* when she catches him drawing them in class. Her smile is forced when he tells her that they were real, that they had saved him and said he could be a hero. She nods, just once, and tells him to focus on the classwork rather than his imaginary friends. This time, Izuku doesn't correct her. He's getting good at recognising when people stare at him as though they're looking through him, like he's a pane of glass.

That would have been the end of it—Izuku would have continued drawing the cheerful girl and pretty boy until the memory faded and he thought the two heroes really were figments of his imagination—but then, three months later, he meets another set of heroes that

shouldn't exist.

Izuku sees the villain coming. He's walking home from the park by himself. None of the other kids wanted to play with him, so he's going home to watch All Might videos, even though Mum says kids his age shouldn't spend all day shut up in the dark.

A hulking villain cracks the footpath under him. His arms are roped with muscle, and his face is twisted up into a snarl, and salvia drips from his pointed teeth. Izuku screams and stumbles back.

A wave of acid cuts through the footpath between them, eating at the cement. The villain stumbles to his feet, but acid sprays across his back and he howls in pain.

A hero in silver jumps onto the villain's shoulders and sends shockwaves of electricity coursing down his back. The villain falls to his knees. Tape wraps around the villain, keeping him immobilised on the ground. Every time he tries to rip through the tape and get back up, another pulse of electricity sends him back down again.

A woman with pink skin crouches in front of Izuku. "Are you okay?"

Izuku pushes himself to his feet. One of the other heroes, a man with lemon-coloured hair, says, "Holy shit."

The tape hero elbows him in the side. "Language, dude. He's five."

"I'm five and three-quarters," Izuku corrects.

"That's very grown up." Izuku's shoulders rise up to hide his ears. He knows the acid hero is just trying to be nice. But she waves her hands in the air, and puts on a big, happy smile, and says, "I mean it! That villain is scary and you didn't cry once. This guy cried the first time he faced a villain and he was fifteen—ten years older than you."

She points at the electricity hero with her thumb. The tape hero snickers. The electricity hero makes a sound like a seagull's squawk.

"Hey! Most of the class cried that time. It was really scary."

“The point is,” says the tape hero, “you’re really brave, buddy. Brave kids deserve a reward. Is there anything you want?”

All his journals are at home, along with his markers. It’s a weekend so he doesn’t have his backpack on him and can’t even ask them to sign his school books.

Instead, Izuku takes a big gulp of air, and says, “Do you—do you want to play with me?”

He stands with his fists pressed to his sternum and his knees locked straight, the way he stands when he’s saying something big and important to Kacchan even though his heart is pounding and his head feels tight because he knows Kacchan is more likely to blast him backward than to listen.

The heroes don’t blast him back. They smile. The lemon-haired hero says, “Hell yeah, little man.”

The tape hero fiddles with something on his wrist—like a watch, but smoother and without a clock-face. “Let me send a message to Traverse so he can collect this shi—uh. The bad guy. Take Mi—”

The tape hero cuts himself off again. He looks at Izuku and smiles, but it isn’t the easy, happy smiles they’ve been giving him. It looks like it doesn’t fit right on his face.

“Hey,” he says, “what’s your name, buddy?”

“Oh!” says the acid hero.

“Good save, man,” says the electric hero. “That could’ve ended badly.”

“I’m Midoriya Izuku. What, uh, what are your names?”

“I’m Alien Queen,” says the acid hero proudly. Izuku blinks. It doesn’t like a very heroic name. The other heroes look pained.

“Uh,” says the tape hero, “I’m … Tape-Man. Yeah. Tape-Man.”

The electric hero is silent for a long moment. They stare at him. Izuku can hear the other kids yelling and laughing from the park a few streets away, and for once, he doesn’t wish he was there with them, even when he hears the soft sounds of explosions and knows that Kacchan is running the Bakugou Hero Agency without him.

“Man, come on,” Tape-Man says eventually, cutting through the

silence. “It’s not that hard.”

“It is that hard! I’m bad at coming up with things on the spot.”

“What about when we had to come up with one—” Alien Queen begins.

“I came up with that name years before UA. My brother suggested it.” The electric hero scrubs a hand through his hair, making it stick up in the back. “How do I come up with another one?”

“How about Electro?” Izuku suggests.

They all turn to look at him. The electric hero—Electro—snorts with laughter. “I think that might actually be a better name than—okay. Sure. Electro it is.”

Izuku smiles. He doesn’t ask why a hero has waited this long to come up with a hero name. Electro said he was bad at coming up with names, after all.

They leave Tape-Man to watch over the villain. They head into a quiet side-street where they won’t disturb passing cars, and play right there in the street. Izuku doesn’t have his All Might costume with him, but he’s played heroes and villains enough times that he doesn’t need the outfit to be a hero. Alien Queen and Electro pretend to be villains and Izuku chases after them.

Tape-Man returns sometime later, sans the villain, just as Izuku is scaling Electro like a tree and yelling about restoring justice. Electro is shouting at Alien Queen to help him. Alien Queen is bent over laughing on the other side of the street, refusing to help her partner.

“Tape-Man!” Electro shouts, and then bursts out laughing. He whispers, *“Tape-Man”* to himself, as though the name is the funniest thing he’s heard, before smoothing out his features. “Tape-Man, you have to help me defeat this hero!”

Tape-Man pulls Izuku to his chest. Izuku squeals and tries to flail about in his grip, but Tape-Man launches a rope of tape onto the tall apartment building beside them and they rocket up into the air.

Izuku clutches at Tape-Man, but he can’t stop beaming. They soar up and over the street until the entire neighbourhood is spread out beneath them. Izuku can see the park Kacchan wouldn’t let him play at. He can see his school crowning over suburban houses. He can see

his own street. Maybe Mum is looking out the window and can see him flying through the air. He waves in the direction of his apartment, just in case.

The heroes can't stay forever. They each scoop Izuku into a hug before they leave and that, on top of the hours spent playing with him, is worth more than any autograph.

That night, Izuku sketches the trio in his journal, over and over again until he's sure he has Alien Queen's horns just right, and the zigzag of black in Electro's hair, and Tape-Man's bulbous elbows.

He googles the heroes, but, just like Floaty Girl and Ice Prince, he doesn't find anything. According to the internet, Alien Queen, Tape-Man, and Electro don't exist.

Mum frowns when Izuku tells her about the heroes at breakfast. He thinks she might not believe him, but they were real. Izuku remembers the feel of Electro's leather jacket under his palm. He remembers Alien Queen's burble of acid eating at the pavement. He remembers Tape-Man's solid grip around his middle as they soared above the neighbourhood.

Even if no one believes him, Izuku knows his heroes are real.

When Izuku is six, a truck veers off the road and onto the footpath. It almost hits him, but a man with engines in his legs pulls him clear of a truck. He sets Izuku down gently, and then dives into the truck to grab the woman behind the wheel. He cuffs the woman's hands behind her back and secures a muzzle around her mouth. Izuku thinks this is extreme, until the hero pulls his hand away from her face and Izuku sees the holes in his gloves. Acid spit.

"Are you alright?" The hero has a square face and squarer glasses. He's so tall that Izuku has to crane his head back to see him.

"Is she related to Alien Queen?" Izuku asks. "She has acid spit, and Alien Queen could shoot acid out of her hands, so maybe they're cousins."

“Alien Queen?” The man’s mouth thins into a disapproving line. “Ah, no. She’s definitely not related to Alien Queen.”

Most people screw their faces up when Izuku talks about Alien Queen, but this hero doesn’t. He knows who Alien Queen is. It sounds like he’s met her before.

Izuku bounces in place. “You know Alien Queen? Are you friends? Partners? Do you take down villains together?”

The hero pushes his glasses up his nose. His armour is in bits in pieces, as though he got dressed in the dark and forgot to pull on half the components.

“I know her, but I can’t talk about her. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Izuku says. “What’s your name?”

“ … I can’t tell you that either.”

“Oh,” Izuku says again. He stops bouncing. “Did you get dressed in the dark?”

The hero looks down at himself and grimaces. “I got dressed in a hurry. The villain attack caught me by surprise. We’ve been monitoring—nevermind. I’m glad you’re alright.”

The hero agrees to give Izuku an autograph. He signs it, *Your friend,* just like Floaty Girl and Ice Prince. He gives Izuku a hug, too. It’s a good hug. The armour digs into Izuku’s stomach and cheek, but the hero is tall and warm and he presses Izuku to his chest as though he’s something precious.

Izuku is so excited by the run-in with such a great hero that he doesn’t pause to think about the run-away truck or the driver that seemed to aim for him, specifically.

Izuku sketches the hero when he gets home and jots down details about his quirk. Then, he googles him. It’s beginning to feel like a routine, now.

Unlike the other times, though, Izuku manages to find a hero that looks just like the man he ran into. Ingenium. A real pro. He’s relatively young; he only graduated from UA two years ago. His armour is a sleek white and black, and his face is square, and his hair blue, but he seems slightly off. Something about him is not quite right.

And … and he has engines in his forearms. Not his legs. His hero agency is several hours away from here.

Mum frowns at the screen when Izuku shows her. “It says he stopped a robbery in Tokyo this morning. That’s hours away. He’s too far away to have saved you, Izuku. Are you sure you didn’t mishear the name?”

The hero hadn’t told Izuku his name.

Mum is frowning at him again, her brows pinched together in worry. It’s a familiar look. She wears it when he brings up his dream to be a hero.

Izuku mumbles, “Yeah. I must have heard wrong.”

This is something he’ll have to figure out himself.

Izuku has his head down and he is focused on putting one foot in front of the other. His ribs aches and his arm stings from his elbow to his fingers. Kacchan had spent the summer increasing the range and force of his explosions, and it shows. Hero training, he had called it. If Kacchan spends next summer furthering his quirk, he may start to do serious damage to Izuku. Permanent damage.

Izuku stumbles and almost falls. He shoves that thought away. He has to work on getting home. If he thinks about what happened less than an hour ago, he might break down crying again, and the sun is beginning to set. Mum will be worried. He has to get home.

He doesn’t notice the villains until he bumps right into one.

The man is easily twice his height. He’s flanked by two others. Strength augmentation quirks, probably. They bear their teeth and flex their arms at him. The street is empty behind him. There’s no one coming to his aid.

The man to the left eyes Izuku up and down. “You sure this is him? He doesn’t look like much.”

“All the books say he started small. His quirk developed late or

something."

"He's already all beat up, though. You think he would let people push him around?"

"Please," Izuku says, drawing his arms up against his chest, "I don't have any money. I'm just trying to get home."

They laugh like Izuku has said something funny. Izuku's instincts are screaming at him to run, but his feet are rooted to the ground.

He thinks, *This is going to hurt so much more than Kacchan's explosions.*

They take a step forward, and Izuku stumbles back and collides with someone else. He whirls around. He was alone a few minutes ago, just him and these three villains in the empty street turned orange by the setting sun, but now there are two more men. One with a smile that shows off his sharp teeth and red hair gelled into spikes, and the other with green grenades strapped to his wrists and a motorbike helmet obscuring his face.

"Oh, fuck," says the big villain.

Grenades launches himself at the group, tackling them to the ground. They skid across the pavement in a sprawl of limbs.

Grenades works them over with brutal efficiency. His quirk is nasty. Explosions. Bigger than Kacchan's, even.

The other man, the red one, crouches down beside Izuku. His smile is kind, even if his teeth are pointy like a shark's. "Are you okay?"

"Who are you?" Izuku asks.

Red doesn't answer. He's too busy looking Izuku over, expression morphing into something unreadable. "Your arm—your face. What happened?"

Izuku hides his scorched arm behind his back. "I'm fine."

"I can tell you're not fine, little man."

Izuku looks back at Grenades. Explosions aren't a common quirk, but it's not unheard of. His quirk is so much more powerful than Kacchan's. It's frightening and beautiful all at once.

Why hasn't he heard of this hero? Izuku assumes he's a hero, anyway.

He's been cataloguing heroes for years. If he came across a hero with a quirk similar to Kacchan's, he would have recorded it, and Kacchan would probably go on and on about a hero if they had a quirk like his, loud enough for the entire class to hear, either because it proved his quirk is suited to heroics, or because it would annoy him to have an existing hero out there with a similar quirk. He'd think they were copying him or showing him up, even if Kacchan was born after them.

"You should get that treated," Red says, trying to peer at Izuku's injured arm.

"Are you heroes?" Izuku asks.

Red freezes. It's a simple question, isn't it? Unless these two are vigilantes. That would explain the helmet Grenades is wearing, the one that hides his identity and makes him look a bobble-head.

"Yes," Red says, scratching at the back of his head. "I mean, we will be? I mean. Yes. Yeah. We're heroes."

"You will be?" Izuku echoes.

"You said too much, you idiot." Grenades has finished tying up the villains. His voice is deep and gruff, muffled by the helmet. "We're heroes. End of story."

"This whole thing has me all flustered, dude," Red says, standing up. He's tall, almost the same height as Grenades, but some of that might be from his hair. "I mean, look at him."

Grenades does. Izuku shrinks back. He can't see Grenades eyes, or even his face, but he can feel his gaze like a physical weight.

"You're hurt," Grenades says. It's not a question. "Someone did that to you."

"It's nothing," Izuku says. "You don't need to—you don't have to worry or anything. I'm fine. It's not—I'm handling everything."

"He's wrong," Grenades says. "He's wrong, and one day he's going to realise that, and he'll never touch you again. He couldn't, even if he wanted to."

"Pa—pardon?" Izuku says in a small voice.

"He'll be sorry," Grenades says. "He'll be so fucking sorry."

“You said ‘he’,” Izuku says. “Do you know—”

“I guessed.”

Grenades stalks away, back to the unconscious villains. The setting sun glances off his helmet. He looks strange and dreamlike, bathed in orange light. The entire street looks unreal. Maybe Kacchan shoved him too hard and he hit his head on the way down.

“Can you get home by yourself?” Red asks.

“Yes,” Izuku says.

Red ruffles his hair and even though it jostles the bruise on the back of his head, Izuku leans into the touch. Red’s palm is warm and scratchy. Solid. Real.

“Get yourself looked at,” Red says. “And remember that one day—”

“Careful,” Grenades warns in a low rumble.

“You’re telling me to be careful? After what you just said?”

Grenades goes quiet, turning his back on them. Red scrunches up his face like he’s thinking hard.

“It gets better,” Red finally settles on. He scrubs his hands through Izuku’s hair again. Izuku closes his eyes, and Red does it again. Izuku wants to stay there all night.

When he opens his eyes again, Red is watching him with an unreadable expression and Grenades is hovering behind him, his hands clenched into fists. Grenades is staring at him again. Izuku flinches back in surprise. Grenades stumbles away like Izuku is the frightening one.

“Sorry,” Izuku says, even though he’s not sure what he has to be sorry for. The line of Grenades body is tense. It hurts to look at.

“Don’t apologise,” Grenades says.

“Sorry,” Izuku says and then realises his mistake. “Uh.”

“This is kind of painful to watch,” Red says, but he’s smiling.

“Sorry,” Izuku says again. The two heroes stare at him. “Oh! I mean—I mean—”

“We should get going,” Grenades says.

Red nods and heads over to the trussed up villains. His back is broad and textured strangely, faint lines running down his skin like the bark of a tree. Does it have something to do with his quirk? Izuku hadn’t seen his quirk. He wonders why Red is here if Grenades is capable of handling so many villains by himself.

He casts another glance at Grenades. The stiff posture tells him everything; Grenades is anxious about something. Red, with his kind smile and warm hands scrubbing easily through hair, is there to keep his partner steady.

“Thank you,” Izuku tells Grenades, “for saving me.”

“Don’t thank me,” Grenades says.

Izuku wrinkles his nose. No apologies and now no thank yous? Who is this hero?

Grenades hesitates and then he reaches out, like he’s afraid Izuku will bite his hand off, and ruffles his hair like Red did. His glove is uncomfortable in his curls and he isn’t as gentle as Red, but it’s nice.

“Wait,” Izuku says, “what are your names? Can I have your autograph?”

He turns around, looking for someplace that might have paper, someone on the street he could borrow a pen from, but there’s no one around. When Izuku turns back around, both heroes and the unconscious villains are gone, as though they’d never been there at all.

A villain floods the neighbourhood park, half-submerging the bushland. If Izuku was standing upright, the muddy water would only reach his bellybutton, but the villain keeps him down, holds his legs flat against the earth, even as Izuku squirms and claws at her hands. The villain has gills on her neck. She smiles at him when he opens his mouth to scream and only bubbles come out.

The water is murky and littered with tree-parts and neighbourhood debris—rubbish and spare shoes and long, sharp sticks. Izuku can barely make out the villain's face through the dirty water. The hero that wrestles him free of the villain is just a blur of green.

Izuku breaches the surface and sucks in air. His whole body is shaking. If it weren't for the hero—her tongue, secured around his waist, keeping him steady—he would have toppled back under the water.

"Are you alright? Ribbit."

Izuku squints at her through sore eyes. "What … what happened?"

"A villain attack. You're safe now, though. My partner is taking care of it."

The hero is frog-themed. Her costume is designed to match her quirk, assumedly. It's friendly, the kind of happy yellow and green that Izuku would instinctively trust if he saw her out on patrol. She tilts her head to one side and taps her finger against her mouth, watching him with big eyes.

"You're very cute," she says.

Izuku squeaks and flails back. This time, he does fall back into the water. She hauls him back onto the tree branch easily, and holds him a bit tighter.

"What? I'm not—*what?"*

"And the same as ever." She's smiling. Is she laughing at him? "I like being truthful, and the truth is that you make a cute kid."

"Stop!" Izuku buries his wet face in his hands. His cheeks are burning. Mum said something about wet hair making you sick—is Izuku already developing a fever?

"Alright, I'll stop." She looks over his shoulder. "She's almost done. Are you okay, now?"

Izuku nods, yes. He pushes his wet fringe out of his face. "Um … Thank you. For saving me, I mean. Can I ask what your name is?"

"Froppy."

"Froppy!" Izuku bounces in place. The tree branch bounces with him,

making the entire tree shake. “That’s a really cool hero name. Thank you for telling me. Could I get your autograph, too?”

“I don’t think we’ll have time,” Froppy says, “but I’ll give you my autograph one day. Ribbit.”

Izuku doesn’t quite understand what *one day* means, but she didn’t tell him no, so he’s happy.

“All done!”

Izuku whirls around with such force that he almost falls out of tree, even with Froppy’s support. He can’t breathe. There’s no water in his lungs, no villains near him, but he can’t breathe, because there, wading through the waist-high water, her suit as pink and her smile as bright as he remembers, is—

“Floaty Girl.”

Floaty Girl stops in the middle of the clearing. “I thought—”

“I didn’t want to just stash him somewhere and then leave him.” Froppy gestures at Izuku, but he’s too busy staring at Floaty Girl with stars in his eyes to notice. “He’s too cute. Ribbit.”

“Hey, there,” Floaty Girl says to Izuku in a soft, private tone.

Izuku presses his hands to his cheeks, suddenly shy. In a small voice, he says, “Hi.”

“I was wrong,” says Froppy. “*This* is too cute. You’re both too cute.”

It’s hard to tell beneath her pink visor, but he thinks Floaty Girl is blushing.

“Oh,” Izuku says. “Are you two girlfriends? Or maybe wives?”

Are they old enough to be married? Married hero pairs aren’t very common, but they exist, like the Water Horse heroes. Izuku has always admired those kinds of heroes.

Froppy drops him. Water splashes over Izuku’s head and douses his curls once more. Izuku splutters and tries to get his feet under him.

Floaty Girl helps him stand. Froppy says, “I’m sorry, Izuku. You surprised me.”

Izuku takes in Floaty Girl's deep blush, and says, "I embarrassed you."

"No, you didn't," Floaty Girl says. "I'm not embarrassed. I'm not embarrassed at all."

Izuku coughs up the water he accidentally swallowed. Once he has his breath back, he jerks upright and points at Froppy. "Wait—you called me Izuku!"

"Oh, dear," Froppy says. Floaty Girl is flailing about in the water. Izuku can't tell if she's still embarrassed at being called Froppy's wife or if she's panicked at this revelation.

"Alien Queen told me your name," Froppy says. "I recognised your freckles and green hair. Ribbit."

"Alien Queen remembers me?" Izuku asks.

"Of course she does," Floaty Girl says. "I remember you, too, even if you've gotten taller since we first met."

"You *did?"* Izuku asks.

Floaty Girl's smile is as a wide and cheerful as he remembers. It's like All Might's smile—it puts something warm and ticklish in his stomach, like he's swallowed a fistful of flower buds that are now blossoming under his skin.

"Of course. We're friends, aren't we?"

Izuku jumps at Floaty Girl. She laughs and scoops him up under the arms and spins him around. They're both wet and their hair drips into their eyes, and Froppy is watching from up above, but Izuku thinks he's never been this happy in his life.

"So are you married to Froppy?" Izuku asks when Floaty Girl puts him down.

Floaty Girl doesn't answer. Instead, she turns to Froppy and says, *"Froppy?"*

"What?" Froppy says. "Why shouldn't he know our names? We'll leave soon and it won't matter."

Floaty Girl frowns. "The others aren't going to like it."

"You're leaving?" Izuku asks.

Izuku's wet fringe drips into his eyes. Floaty Girl pushes it off his forehead. The touch of her hands reminds him of Red. Tears prick at his eyes. He wishes he could see his friends more often.

"You'll see us again," Floaty Girl says. "I know for a fact you will."

"How?" Izuku asks. "How do you know?"

Floaty Girl kneels down in the dirty water and crushes Izuku to her chest. "I just do. Be strong, Izuku."

Izuku hugs back. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

Izuku uses his allowance to buy a stack of notebooks and fresh coloured pencils. He dedicates his original notebook, the one with rough sketches from when he met the first nine heroes, as his identification notebook. In here, he writes down dates and names. He draws the heroes who have saved him. With the new coloured pencils, he meticulously colours in their costumes. It takes him several test runs on a spare sheet of printer paper to find the shade that matches his memories.

The second notebook is his theory notebook. There's so much to unpack. On the first page, he writes down all the questions he has:

- Why have there been so many villain attacks recently?
- Why does no one else recognise these heroes? Why is there no information about them online?
- Why won't some of them tell me their real names?

He will come up with more questions later, he's sure. For now, he brainstorms rough theories and makes notes.

After an hour, he flips back to the first page, and adds:

- How can I meet them again?

These heroes don't have friendly costumes. They don't have a pretty, almost-delicate face like Ice Prince, or a respectable air like Almost-Ingenium, or a bright smile like Floaty Girl. They're dressed in dark colours. A living shadow peers at Izuku over the bird hero's shoulder. The taller hero has six arms, some of which sprout eyes and mouthes at the end instead of hands. Neither of them will tell him their names.

Izuku thinks they're both incredibly cool.

Izuku was almost attacked by villains, but he is already brainstorming possible hero names, unfazed by the near-miss. The taller hero could be Dupli-Man, Muscle-Bound, or Shift Hands. The bird hero could be Reaper, Dark Soul, Black Bird, or Raven.

"Can I have your autograph?" Izuku blurts before the villains have hit the ground. He's not worried about them. These two are capable of handling them.

Black Bird pauses, even as his shadow preens at the attention. "I don't know if that is wise."

"I don't see the harm," says Shift Hands.

Izuku shoves his notebook at Shift Hands. He looks down at the blank page, pen held in one of his many hands, and then says, "Ah. Now I see."

"Have you given an autograph before?" Izuku says.

"Yes," Shift Hands says slowly. "It's just …"

"We walk a shaded path," Black Bird says. "One day the shadows will retreat and you will be beside us, bathed in sunlight, but for now, we must remain a mystery."

Izuku glances from Black Bird to Shift Hands. "Uh. Pardon?"

"You're just being cryptic to confuse him," Shift Hand accuses.

Black Bird sticks his beak into the air. "We were told not to give anything away."

“An autograph isn’t giving anything away. Not if we do it right.”

Shift Hands seems to think for several moments before finally scribbling something down. He passes the journal to Black Bird, who also signs it. His shadow curves over his shoulder, peeking at the signature, and bursts out into coughing laughter.

Black Bird hands the journal back. Not every hero agrees to give him their autograph, so Izuku gives them his best toothy smile, so wide it hurts his cheeks, and says, “Thank you. And thank you for saving me, heroes!”

“This light,” Black Bird says, “it’s blinding.”

Shift Hands nods solemnly. “It’s the same smile, but it’s also …”

“So much more. I will cherish this sight for years to come.”

“I wish I had a camera,” Shift Hands agrees.

Izuku cocks his head to one side. “Huh?”

Shift Hands ruffles his hair. His broad palms are large enough to span the width of Izuku’s face.

“Don’t worry about it,” Shift Hands says.

Izuku opens up his journal to see what their signatures are. It reads: *No. 6* and *the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come.* Somehow, he doubts that this is their real names. Should he keep the names he came up with or should he refer to them as No. 6 and Ghost in his notes? The latter is more accurate, but he was getting attached to Shift Hands and Black Bird.

He puts his journal back into his bag. He’s not surprised that, when he turns back around, the alley is empty save for bags of rotting garbage and faint blood stains on the brick walls.

Izuku recognises the tall silhouettes shadowed by the setting run before they have turned around. It’s not the two-toned hair or the

detailed amour—it's the quiet dignity with which they hold themselves; the slope of their broad shoulders; the way they stand like they will not be moved.

Izuku should look for villains since his friends only appear when there is danger near, but he can't take his eyes off them. He runs, backpack thumping nosily with every step, and the two heroes turn.

"Ah," says Ice Prince. "It seems we lost track of time."

"We miscalculated," corrects Almost-Ingenium. "Surveillance usually doesn't eat up so much time, but we forgot to take into account how unfamiliar with the landscape we are."

Izuku steadies himself with his hands on his knees. "You're *here*."

"You should be hurrying home," says Almost-Ingenium.

Izuku has a dozen questions he wants to ask. All the words try and come out at once and he chokes on the syllables, spluttering up at his heroes.

Ice Prince drops a hand on his shoulder. It's hot, like he's just climbed out of the bath. The warmth seeps into his skin, even through Izuku's winter uniform.

"Breathe," Ice Prince says.

Izuku sucks in several rattling breaths under their careful watch. They don't hurry him or move along to do something more important elsewhere. They're patient. They're *here*.

"What are you doing here?" Izuku demands when his breathing evens out.

"Patrolling," says Ice Prince.

"Do you patrol here regularly? What hero agency do you work under? Am I going to see you around here again?"

Ice Prince looks to Almost-Ingenium for guidance. Almost-Ingenium says, "That isn't information we can give out to civilians."

"You can't even tell me where you work?" Izuku narrows his eyes at Ice Prince. "Can you at least tell me your hero name?"

"I'm sorry," Almost-Ingenium says. "We can't do that."

“A few of the others already have,” Ice Prince says.

“I know. We can’t change that. But that doesn’t mean we can just be reckless—”

Izuku is mentally recording everything they say. Pro heroes aren’t secretive, not to fans and the media, unless they’re asked a case-sensitive question, and Izuku only wants to know their names, their agencies, and how to support them. The only way their secrecy might make sense is if they were underground heroes with quirks that made it difficult for them to operate if they were well-known, but neither Ice Prince or Almost-Ingenium look like conventional underground heroes. Neither of their costumes are designed for the dark, and with their marketable styles, they have the potential to be incredibly popular. Agencies would probably encourage them to go public. Plus, their quirks are more suited for daytime activity. Ice Prince’s quirk especially would be difficult to keep secret, given how ice powers are. So why can’t Izuku know something as simple as their names—

When Izuku looks away from his hands, twisting and untwisting in his uniform shirt, he finds the heroes staring at him with unreadable expressions. If he didn’t know any better, he would say that they almost looked … fond.

“Ah!” Izuku waves his hands in the air. “I did it again. I’m always getting in trouble with my teachers for mumbling aloud like that. I don’t even realise—I just get stuck in my head and don’t realise. I’m—I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine,” Ice Prince says in a flat voice, but he’s smiling, faintly. Flat is his default, Izuku thinks. It makes him seem very cool. Untouchable. Like nothing could bother him. Izuku is jealous. His voice is all wobbly and high-pitched and he mumbles and rambles whenever something strikes his interest. He’ll never be a cool-type hero like Ice Prince.

“Your curiosity and analytic nature will be valuable when you’re older,” Almost-Ingenium says. Ice Prince glares at him. “What? That isn’t anything out of the ordinary to say. Those are both worthwhile traits that anyone in any career would find useful.”

“Um,” Izuku says.

“You should be getting home,” Ice Price says. “It’ll be getting dark soon.”

“Will I see you again?” Izuku asks.

The heroes exchange unreadable glances. “Yes,” Ice Prince says, “you will. I promise.”

Hero Journal #10

They look the same as I remember. I thought I had been exaggerating how pretty Ice Prince was but he’s still so handsome and I Their hero costumes haven’t changed either, even if Almost-Ingenium was wearing more of his armour this time around.

This is further confirmation that the heroes all know one another. How many are there? How do they know one another? Hero agencies don’t normally employ so many pro heroes at once. Are they friends? Did they go to school together? Are they united in a similar cause?

Why doesn’t anyone else know that they exist?

“What are you doing, Deku?”

Izuku folds his arms over the desk to hide his sketches, but Kacchan shoves his hands aside and wrestles a sheet of paper free. He holds it up and sneers. Izuku has drawn Ice Prince staring at some point in the distance, the wind tugging through his long hair, flecks of ice creeping up one side of his body. The drawing is in pencil. Izuku was planning on colouring it that afternoon and taping it into his journal.

“What the fuck, Deku? An imaginary boyfriend?”

The kids behind him snicker to themselves. Izuku feels very small.

“Give it back!”

Izuku makes a grab for the drawing, but Kacchan holds it up even higher and shoves Izuku back down in his seat with one hand.

Kacchan peers at the other drawings. Alien Queen's black eyes, and Almost-Ingenium's armour, and Black Bird's billowing cape is just visible, poking out beneath Izuku's arms. Kacchan wrestles free the drawing of Alien Queen.

"Who is this?" he demands.

"She's a hero," Izuku says. "She's my friend."

"What's her name, then?" Kacchan asks.

"Alien Queen."

Kacchan stares at him for a long moment, something twisted up about his expression, before he shoves at Izuku's desk. Its skids back, the metal feet scraping loudly against the floor, and Izuku is shoved back with it.

"Fuck off," Kacchan says. "How do you know her, then? There's no pro hero called Alien Queen."

"She—she's a hero. She's a hero and she's my frie—friend."

"Pathetic," Kacchan says. "Fucking pathetic. No one wants to be around you, so you have to invent imaginary friends."

"They're not imaginary," Izuku says.

"Oh, yeah? You going to introduce me to your friends, Deku?"

Even if he wanted to, Izuku doesn't think he could. They never stick around for long. They're not his friends in the way that Kacchan was his friend, playing together on the weekend, and walking to and from school, and sharing everything from lunches to All Might action figures. No one else knows that they exist.

Izuku's shoulders slump. Kacchan laughs, and it's a rough sound, a mean sound, and makes their classmates, watching from neighbouring desks, laugh with him.

Kacchan looks down at the drawing of Ice Prince again, considering it, before ripping it in half, and then quarters, and then in eighths. He throws the pieces over Izuku. When Izuku starts crying, Kacchan rolls his eyes and stalks back to his own desk. He shoves the drawing of

Alien Queen into his uniform pocket.

That night, Izuku tries to tape the drawing back together, but it doesn't look right. He gives up and throws the pieces in the bin. He never gets the drawing of Alien Queen back.

He meets Invisible Girl and Ninja Warrior next, which leads to Izuku barricading himself in his room and theorising all weekend about heroes working in pairs vs in teams vs individually.

Ninja Warrior distracts and baits the fighter-type villain before Invisible Girl pounces on him from behind. The villain goes down hard. Invisible Girl cheers and, assumedly, throws her hands into the air. Ninja Warrior smiles, looks to his right, and freezes upon seeing Izuku.

"I knew what we were getting into," Ninja Warrior says slowly, "but … holy shit."

Invisible Girl follows his line of sight, spots Izuku, and squeals. Izuku jumps back in fright.

"He's so CUTE!" She skips forward. From the bouncing of her gloves, he assumes she's jumping up and down. "Hey, how old are you, sweetheart? You must still be a few years off from UA!"

"UA?" Izuku repeats.

The bouncing stops. "High school in general, I mean. We went to UA, so it's easy to forget other schools exist. Why, do you want to go to UA?"

There's something in her tone that makes him think he's missing something. These two attended UA. Did the others attend UA, too? If only UA's information was available to the public, then he could go digging and find their real names.

"Everyone wants to go to UA," Izuku says, "but their admission-rate is so low. I'd be impossible to get in."

“You never know,” Invisible Girl says and then laughs like she’s said something funny.

They don’t know he’s quirkless. The realisation is like a jolt of ice through his stomach. Izuku doesn’t tell people if he can help it. People in his life will always find out—at school, you’re asked what your quirk is right after your name, and Izuku is kind of infamous for being quirkless.

None of the heroes have asked his quirk yet. Izuku won’t volunteer that information on his own.

Ninja Warrior frowns, his tail thumping at the asphalt like the foot of a rabbit. A nervous tick. Invisible Girl notices Ninja Warrior’s silence and elbows him in the side. “What’s up?”

“Just … ” Ninja Warrior looks at Izuku. There’s something twisted up about his expression—something almost amused, almost fond, but pained, too. Like looking at Izuku hurts him. “Were you always this small?”

There’s a tense pause and then Invisible Girl laughs again. This isn’t the easy, feminine laughter of before; this is a manic sound, this side of too sharp. “You hit your head back there, honey. All kids are small, remember? You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Right,” Ninja Warrior says, shaking his head. “Right. Kids are small, and then they grow up, and they’re not small and they can handle themselves. They turn into scary teenagers or adults that no one can touch.”

“Are you okay?” Izuku asks slowly.

“I’ve been in some strange, stressful situations lately,” Ninja Warrior says. “Don’t worry, kid.”

“I hope everything works out,” Izuku says.

“You’re sweet, but we have to be going,” Invisible Girl says.

She tussles his hair and then tugs Ninja Warrior back down the street. Why do heroes keep ruffling his hair? What is it about him that draws mysterious heroes to him and then compels him to save him and mess with his hair in equal measures?

“See you later, honey,” Invisible Girl shouts over her shoulder, Ninja

Warrior stumbling over his feet to keep up with her. They disappear around a corner. Izuku gives chase, but when he rounds the corner, he finds a wide, empty street. Neither hero is in sight.

The heroes that save him every few months should be famous. They're the kind of heroes that people should sit up and notice. But no one else knows who they are.

Izuku has dozens of theories, some more plausible than others. Currently, his top five working theories are:

1. These heroes do covert operations. Underground heroes stay out of the public eye for the most part, but maybe these heroes are on another level, dealing with conspiracies and terrorist threats and all kinds of classified things that are not safe for public consumption. This theory is undermined by the fact that A) none of them, aside from Black Bird and maybe Shift Hands, possess the kind of quirk suited for covert hero work, and B) Izuku isn't worth this amount of effort.
2. Izuku received an untreated brain injury when he was younger. Kacchan knocked something loose in his head and now Izuku is dreaming of heroes swooping in and saving him. He hates this theory.
3. This is an elaborate practical joke or social experiment. Either someone is watching and laughing at his expense, or this is a drawn out experiment testing to see what the average child would do when faced with regular villain attacks and hero interactions. Izuku doesn't know why the joke or experiment might continue on for years. His reactions aren't especially noticeable. He has grown a little more sure of himself, a little less likely to startle at loud noises or panic when confronted with danger, but he hasn't changed that much. Surely the experiment would have plateaued by now.
4. He was influenced by someone's wild quirk years ago, possibly a child without full control of their power, that has made him hallucinate random heroes and villains; although, Izuku doesn't know anyone who's quirk is powerful enough to accidentally affect someone for years, and he doesn't know anyone that would purposefully waste that much energy on him.
5. This is the result of a latent quirk—*Izuku's* latent quirk. This one

hurts too much to even consider. He cannot let himself hope, not again, not after years of crushing disappointment and grief. It would be a double-edge sword, too—to discover after years of torment that he does have a quirk, but it is impossible to prove to those around him and it is useless for heroics.

He scraps each theory almost immediately. His friends feel solid and real when they pull him out of danger; when they scoop him up and carry him to safety; when they crush him to their chest in a desperate hug before dropping him, as though shocked by their own actions, as though remembering they're hugging a strange quirkless child rather than a loved one. Izuku can't believe that his heroes are anything other than real.

The van jerks as it barrels over a speed-bump. Izuku is thrown against the hard edge of the door.

The other person in the back of the van, a man in a fox mask, laughs at Izuku's frantic, winded inhales. Izuku's hands are tied behind his back, but he manages to get his feet under him and push himself upright. Fox laughs even harder when he sees blood drip down Izuku's temples and into his lashes. His whole face feels wet with blood, and tears, and spit that leaks down his chin from the coarse rope stuffed in his mouth.

Fox reaches for him. Izuku flinches back, but there's nowhere to go. A hand claps down on his shoulder, keeping him in place. Fingers drag over the wound on his head. Fox holds them up, examining the red sheen of his fingertips, before sliding his fingers into his own mouth and sucking.

Izuku starts crying. He wants to be strong, but he's so scared.

Fox grins around his fingers. "You taste so sweet. I always knew you would."

Izuku curls up against the door. He imagines Floaty Girl tapping the van and making it fly up into the air so all the bad guys slide right out the door, away from him. He thinks about Black Bird descending on

the van like a bat. His shadow would smash through the window and pull Izuku to safety. He thinks about Alien Queen melting the door clear off its hinges so Izuku could scramble out and run for safety.

He thinks about All Might. He wants All Might to be here, to let him know it's alright. He would rip the door off and pull Izuku into his strong arms. He would be smiling, even as he knocked the villains out with a single punch. Then he would pull the ropes off and carry Izuku all the way home to Mum—

Mum. She must be so worried.

"Aw," Fox coos. He pulls his fingers out of his mouth. They're spit-shiny. All trace of Izuku's blood is gone. Swallowed. "What's wrong, little bunny? Where's that big, bright smile? Where's your bounce? Not so 'can do' anymore, are you?"

The van slows and then stops, but the engines keeps vibrating beneath them. They must be idling at a red light. Izuku pushes himself up and lunges for the cloth blacking out the windows. If he can signal to a passing car, then they can call the heroes—

Fox catches him by the hood and yanks him back. Izuku chokes. Fox's arms wrap around his middle. Izuku can feel his hot breath ghosting against the back of his neck. Fox says something, something terrible, but Izuku is deafened by his own heartbeat.

He thinks the shout and thump from the front seat are hallucinations, at first, but then the engine switches off. The front doors open and slam closed.

Fox doesn't notice, but Izuku does. Are they not at a red light? Have they arrived at their destination?

The back door is ripped open. Fox jumps to his feet.

A man with purple, slicked-back hair glowers up at them. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"How did you—" Fox cuts off mid-sentence, clapping a hand against his mouth, but it's too late. His eyes glaze over. His shoulders slump, all the fight drained out of him.

"Let go of him and exit the van," says the purple-haired hero.

Fox drops Izuku and stands. His face is blank. He robotically climbs

out of the van. The hero sweeps Fox's feet out from under him and restrains him.

"Go to sleep," says the hero. Fox closes his eyes against the asphalt and dozes off. The man approaches the van slowly, hands open. "Are you alright?"

Izuku looks at him with wide eyes. He makes a muffled sound behind his gag.

"Shit. Right."

The man pulls out a pocket-knife and climbs into the van. Izuku forces himself to hold still when the man crouches down in front of him and takes hold of his jaw so he can cut the gag free. He severs the ropes around Izuku's arm and legs before stepping back out of his personal space.

"That was mind control," Izuku says.

The hero won't look at him. "Yes. It was. I won't use it on you, though."

"I didn't think you would," Izuku says.

The hero blinks at him, almost surprised, though Izuku doesn't know why. He saved him. Izuku is still reeling from the aftereffect of panic, but he's already picked out a name for this hero: The Operator.

The Operator gives Izuku a piggy-back ride home. When prompted, he talks about his quirk and the design elements of his costume. He doesn't comment on how violently Izuku is shaking. He even asks questions about how Izuku is doing at school and manages to sound genuinely interested rather than politely detached, unlike most of the adults Izuku meets.

"Villains try and attack me all the time," Izuku says into the Operator's high collar, "but it's never been this bad. None of the villains have managed to actually grab me before."

The Operator's hands tighten and then slacken around Izuku's knees. "I'm sorry. I should have gotten there sooner. And I should have kept a better watch on those villains."

"It's okay. You came. That's what matters." A thought occurs to Izuku suddenly. "Hey, Operator? You know the others, right?"

He snorts. “Operator?”

“It’s what I’m naming you, since you aren’t going to tell me your real hero name, right? You don’t seem like the type to reveal that.”

A pause. “No. It’s not a good idea.”

There’s a long pause. Izuku’s vision is blurry. They pass a park and the cluster of trees swim together into one wet, leafy blob. Izuku closes his eyes.

“Most of the others didn’t tell me their names either,” he says. “I’ve been making up names for them, too. Do you think they’d mind?”

“Can I hear the names you’ve come up with?”

“Uh. There’s Floaty Girl, Ice Prince, Red, Grenades, Shift Hands, Black Bird, Invisible Girl, and Ninja Warrior.”

“Oh, my god.” The Operator sounds delighted, like Izuku has personally handed him a gift. “Ninja Warrior. *Ice Prince.”*

“What?”

“You really went with Invisible Girl?”

“She’s a girl and she’s invisible. I couldn’t be bothered being very creative that day.”

“Neither could she, apparently,” mumbles the Operator.

Izuku doesn’t know what to make of that, so he continues, “And now you’re the Operator.”

“Why did you decide on ‘Operator?’”

“Because you control people, kind of like the way olden day telephone operators controlled phone calls. We watched a documentary about old technology in class a few weeks ago. I considered naming you ‘the Puppeteer’ but that sounds menacing and you’re not menacing. You’re a hero. Heroes should sound cool.”

If fear hadn’t left him feeling so burnt out, and his head didn’t throb with every step, Izuku would probably be using this opportunity to pry the hero for information. But Izuku is content with curling up against the warm, well-armoured back and enjoying the attention.

“Hey, Midoriya?” Izuku hums to show he’s listening. He’s too out of it to question how the Operator knows his name, even though Izuku hadn’t introduced himself. “I’m glad I met you.”

Izuku’s eyes slip shut. “I’m glad I met you, too. Hey, can I have your autograph?”

The Operator laughs. “Sure.”

Izuku sleeps through the rest of the walk. He doesn’t even wake when the Operator brings him home and wards off Mum’s frantic worrying. When Izuku wakes the next morning, Mum sweeps him up into a hug, and plants careful kisses along his tender forehead, and cries into his hair. Izuku clutches at her and finally breaks down.

When they finally pull apart, Mum sets about making an extra large breakfast. She lets him have the day off school to recover.

As she bustles around the kitchen, Mum gushes about the kind, handsome hero that rescued him. Izuku chokes on his glass of water.

“I knew they were real!”

Mum turns to look at him, spatula in hand. “Izuku?”

“My heroes. The heroes who keep rescuing me—I knew other people could see them, too.”

“Are you talking about the Ice King?” Mum asks. “Your imaginary friend?”

Izuku shakes his head. “No. Mum, these heroes that keep rescuing me—they aren’t imaginary. The hero yesterday proves it. I bet if we googled him, he wouldn’t have any results.”

Mum turns off the stove. She’s taking him seriously, now. “What did he say his name was, again?”

“He said—” Izuku falters. “Uh. He didn’t say, actually. I named him.”

Mum stares at him. Izuku pushes his plate away and feels, suddenly, very tired.

“Maybe he’s one of those underground heroes?” Mum says gently, like she’s trying not to hurt his feelings. “They usually aren’t very public. And you did have a head wound, honey.”

“Right. Of course.”

After breakfast, after Izuku inches towards to Mum until she notices his embarrassed expression and sweeps him up into another hug and gently pats his hair until he feels better, he tracks down his notebook. It’s on the desk. He doesn’t remember leaving it on the desk.

He flips open to the last used page. There’s an autograph. A new autograph.

Thank you.

— The Operator

What is the Operator thanking *Izuku* for?

Izuku doesn’t say it out loud, but these dozen or so heroes are his friends. His only friends. School is a lesson in isolation, but Izuku can duck into a bathroom stall and open up his notebook and see drawings of his friends, see their smiling faces reminding him to never give up hope, and be reminded that he’s not alone, even if it’s been months since he last saw them. Sometimes it’s less than a week between meetings. Sometimes it’s half a year.

After these long absences, he’s always relieved to see them again, and only then, when they’re in front of him, does he admit that he was scared that they would disappear out of his life forever.

Izuku never had a royalty phase. Kacchan had one, though. When they were three, Kacchan wore a plastic crown and a matching cotton cape for six months straight. King Hero, he would call himself, which morphed into King Explosion Hero when his quirk manifested. Izuku thinks he was attracted to kingship mostly because he liked the idea of

power. Izuku had never understood it, even when he was three years old and Kacchan was declaring that Izuku was the weak princess that they all had to save. It was heroes or nothing for Izuku.

The hero before him swishes his cape dramatically. His polished armour and glittery cape glint in the sunlight. It hurts Izuku's eyes to look at him.

"A prince has arrived to save you," says the hero.

"No, thank you," Izuku says.

He goes around the sparkly hero in a wide arch, staying clear out of arms reach. The hero splutters and jogs after him. Izuku walks even faster.

"Wait! There are villains looking for you. Stay here so I can rescue you."

Izuku stops. He turns around, eyeing the hero. "Why are villains after me, a quirkless eleven year old?"

Izuku knows full well that villains would be after him. Not that some random street performer will know that.

The hero tilts his head like a bird. "Pardon? Did you say you're quirkless?"

Izuku scoffs and keeps walking. This probably isn't a hero. This is probably one of those street performers that dress up like heroes and use their flashy quirks to amuse crowds, only to get moved along by mall security—or, in harsher cases, arrested for public quirk usage.

The wannabe hero is still following him.

"I don't have any money," Izuku says.

"Mon bon monsieur, I do not want your money."

The hero keeps pace with him for several blocks. Izuku grits his teeth and goes over a map of the neighbourhood in his head. He's run through these streets enough times as a kid. If he broke into a sprint, he could probably find one of his hiding places before the old guy caught up with him. Kacchan hasn't sniffed out half of his hiding places, and Izuku thinks Kacchan is much stronger then this stranger foreigner in a glittery cape.

“Then who are you?” Izuku asks as he scans the street. The people they pass barely spare them a second glance.

The man looks delighted to have been asked. He draws up his cape and strikes a pose. “I am Prince Charming, the hero who cannot stop twinkling.”

“Right,” Izuku says doubtfully.

“Are you not dazzled?

His hiding spot isn’t for another few streets, but he decides that Prince Charming probably isn’t much of a threat. He could throw his backpack full of heavy books at him if he tried anything funny.

“Look,” Izuku begins, turning around, “I don’t know what you want, but I’m not worth following around like this. I don’t have any money or friends and—”

The smile drops off Prince Charming’s face. He grabs Izuku around the shoulders before Izuku can reach for his backpack and hauls him down the street, right before a fireball scorches the pathway, right where Izuku had been standing.

A villain wreathed in flames steps out of a side alley. His entire outfit is made of studded leather and pointed spikes, and eyeliner is crusted beneath his eyes.

Prince Charming scoffs. “You are as tacky as ever, mon cher.”

Izuku looks Prince Charming up and down. “You’re calling him tacky? That’s kind of hypocritical, isn’t it?”

Prince Charming ignores him. He keeps Izuku behind him while the leather-bound villain attacks with bursts of flames, returning fire with a sparkly beam from his stomach. Izuku ducks behind a sidewall and watches on.

Prince Charming isn’t anything like the Ice Prince, but he’s definitely a real hero. He takes down the flame villain like it’s nothing. He maintains a smile the entire time.

Izuku takes back everything he thought about Prince Charming before. He’s not Izuku’s preferred hero, but he’s a pro. A pro with a theme. A sparkly, royal theme. Izuku can respect that.

When the villain is knocked out by an especially bright beam of light, Prince Charming flips his long hair back and waves Izuku over.

“Can I have your autograph?” Izuku asks, pulling out his hero journal.

Prince Charming’s smile is so wide it seems almost dorky. He bounces on the heels of his silvery boots.

“Mon cher ami, yes! I am honoured. Do not even thank me, it was my pleasure to save you on this lovely Spring afternoon.”

He takes the notebook from Izuku and signs it with a flourish. When he hands it back, Izuku squints at the page.

Merci pour tout, mon ami.

Take care.

✧ *Prince Charming* ✧

“I don’t speak French,” Izuku says, studying the words, trying to piece them together. “What does it say?”

When he looks back up, Prince Charming and the flame villain are gone.

Izuku isn’t surprised when Google yields no results. There are plenty of results for prince charming, but nothing about the blond hero in a sparkly cape. Google translate is much more helpful.

Merci pour tout, mon ami.

Thank you for everything, my friend.

Izuku chews at his fingertips and stares at the screen. What does it mean?

Izuku loves almost every hero he comes across, both online and in person. Every quirk is so amazing and he burns up on the inside with jealousy. Some quirks, though, are undeniably cooler than others.

“Anything?” Izuku echoes, jumping in place. “You can really make *anything?”*

The woman smiles at him. She’s very pretty. “Anything within reason. My fat cells are transformed into different matter, and it’s an exhausting process.”

“That,” Izuku says, “is so cool.”

She refuses to give him a name. Izuku doesn’t mind. He knows some of the heroes just aren’t okay with it.

Izuku spends the rest of the week coming up with a name for her. He almost chooses Creation or Production (Production the Producing Pro Hero sounds too much like a tongue twister). In the end, he settles on *Genesis*. An appropriately cool name for such an amazing hero.

“Your quirk is cool,” Izuku says around his straw, “but I found someone who’s quirk is cooler.”

The Operator snorts. “Just promise me you won’t say electricity or ice-and-fire. Or worse: explosions. I couldn’t stand that.”

Izuku narrows his eyes. “How do you know about those specific quirks?”

The Operator sips at his bubble tea. He’s quiet as he takes a long drink, before saying, too casually, “Just an example. I dislike flashy, offensive-type quirks.”

“But you like All Might and his quirk, right?” Izuku puts his drink down. “You have to.”

The Operator laughs for some reason. “Don’t worry. I think a hero with a quirk similar to All Might would be very strong, so long as they have the heart. And they do. They have that heart.”

“‘Would be an amazing hero?’ All Might is an amazing hero. Present tense.”

The Operator smacks his lips together. They’re faintly blue from his blueberry tea. “Did I mention Japanese isn’t my first language? Tenses are difficult.”

“Liar.”

“So who is this person with the cool quirk?”

Izuku watches the Operator for another long minute. This conversation is full of lies. He’s not upset—a lot of his conversations with these mystery heroes consist of lies and half-truths—but he is hoping that one day they’ll slip and reveal something crucial. Or else they’ll cave in the face of Izuku’s determined stare.

But the Operator doesn’t flinch. If anything, his smile gets wider and wider the longer Izuku stares at him. He seems to enjoy Izuku’s frustration.

“I met a hero with a creation quirk,” Izuku finally says, after a solid minute of staring into the Operator’s unblinking eyes. How did he learn to keep his eyes open for so long?

The Operator laughs. “I’m comfortable losing to her.”

“Her,” Izuku says. “You said her. So you do know the other heroes. Do you know all each other, is that it? Do you work together? You have to. Or else you’re all in communication with one another.”

“You little brat,” says the Operator fondly. “You know I’m not going to spill anything. Tell me about this amazing quirk.”

“The quirk that you know?” Izuku says. “The quirk attached to the person you’re acquainted with?”

The Operator has that unblinking stare fixed on him again, and Izuku sighs. “Fine. I called her Genesis. Her quirk is *fantastic*.”

The Operator visits, sometimes. He's frustrating. Izuku has been running into strange heroes for almost seven years, but he hasn't received many answers. He wants answers.

He has to try something new. He's tried it to the Izuku-way for years. He needs to try it the Bakugou Katsuki way, just once, just to see if he can spook information out of the strange heroes that save him.

A hero in a banana-yellow suit punches a villain through a brick wall and then bodily carries Izuku to safety. Izuku doesn't let himself get overwhelmed by the All Might-like display of strength. He has a mission.

The hero, hastily dubbed Yellow Might, puts him down and ruffles his hair. When he turns to go without a word goodbye, Izuku pounces. He wedges a foot under the man's leg and uses it to lever himself up enough to wrap his arms around Yellow Might's neck and cling like a koala. Yellow Might squawks and tries to pull him off, but Izuku clutches at him even tighter.

"Who are you?" Izuku shouts into his ear. "I need answers. Why do villains keep coming after me? Why do strange heroes keep saving me? Why is it me and not someone else?"

Yellow Might gets a fistful of Izuku's sweater and hauls him off his back. He sets Izuku gently down on the asphalt, his hand still resting on Izuku's shoulder, and there's something about his eyes in that moment, something soft and familiar, that makes Izuku think, *This is it. I'm finally going to get the answers I've been searching for for years.*

But then Yellow Might yanks his hand back like Izuku is a feral animal who is going to bite it off and sprints as fast as he can in the opposite direction, scooping up the unconscious villain as he goes.

"You coward!" Izuku yells after him.

"You'll understand when you're older," Yellow Might calls over his shoulder.

Izuku has had enough of being treated like a kid. He runs after Yellow

Might, but by the time he has caught up, both Yellow Might and the villain have gone. He isn't surprised. He's barely disappointed.

Izuku snaps a photo of the man-shaped hole in the brick wall with his crappy camera phone and then runs home to sketch Yellow Might while his memory is still fresh.

Prince Charming accidentally destroys a public bench and knifes through a cluster of trees with his glittery lasers. Burnt cherry blossoms flutter in the air. The ground is scorched were the bench once was.

Prince Charming's smile never wavers, but Izuku can see that he's sweating. He adjusts his sunglasses and says, in English, "Shit."

Izuku laughs. "You sound like All Might! He swears in English, too."

"He is rubbing off on me, I suppose."

Izuku leaps forward and seizes a handful of purple cape. Prince Charming flinches back instinctively, but Izuku's grip keeps him from getting far. This is the first time any of these heroes have mentioned All Might. He cannot let him go without a fight.

"You've met All Might?!"

"Uh." Prince Charming is sweating even more, now. "I just—I see him on TV, no? Everyone sees him on TV at this moment in time. I am … influenced by his media presence. Yes, that's it. I have never met him in person, though."

Izuku lets go of the cape. He can't hide his disappointment. A part of him had been hoping that All Might was apart of this whole thing for years. It didn't make any sense, but any chance to interact personally with All Might was a chance Izuku would seize with both hands.

But that makes sense. People are influenced by All Might all the time without having met him. Like Izuku. Like Kacchan, who started

swearing regularly in both English and Japanese a long time ago, partially because of the frequency in which All Might swore, and partially because he likes the way people's faces twist up when they hear him.

"Do not look so sad, petit lapin."

Izuku scuffs the grass with his sneakers. "Want to go for milkshakes?"

"Excusez-moi?"

"I want milkshakes."

"I … okay."

Izuku leads them to a small cafe. They garner a few stares, but people are so used to minor heroes, street performers, and cosplayers that they don't question Prince Charming's presence on the streets. Maybe his costume is so flashy that it detracts attention; people assume the gaudy cape, armour, and sunglasses cannot be anything but a performer, rather than an actual hero.

Prince Charming buys them milkshakes and they sit by the window. Prince Charming struggles more than the other heroes had when just spending time with Izuku with no villain in sight. He keeps opening his mouth to say something and then cutting himself off with a wheeze.

Izuku fidgets with his straw. "Hey, Prince?"

Prince Charming looks up from where he is making shapes in his whipped cream. "Yes?"

"Are we friends?"

Prince Charming looks offended. "Yes, of course! You thought we weren't?"

Izuku shrugs. "I thought we were, but you're not around much—you or the other heroes. It's—"

Lonely, Izuku almost says. Isolating. It plays tricks on the mind. When the heroes are gone, and it's just Izuku again, he begins to second-guess everything.

Prince Charming reaches across the table and places his hand on Izuku's. His smile is a little strained, like he's not sure what to do with

his face, but Izuku can hear how hard he's trying through his words. "We're friends. I promise, we're friends. Sometimes, remembering this makes me feel better on bad days."

"Remembering me?" Izuku asks in a small voice.

"Yes. Remembering that I have the honour of being your friend, and the friend of the others."

Prince Charming is the gaudiest hero. He catches the light like a disco ball, blinding onlookers, and he strikes poses, and reapplies lip gloss after each fight, but the way he looks now, squashed into a vinyl booth across from Izuku, reaching out for Izuku's hands, fumbling for the words to tell Izuku that he's honoured to have friends—it makes him seem humble, almost.

Izuku smiles shyly back at him. "Me, too. When I'm sad, I pull out drawings of you all, and it makes me feel better."

"You drew us?" Prince Charming asks. "You have drawn me?"

Izuku snatches his hand back. "No."

"You must show me these drawings!"

"No!"

"You're still drawing those fucking imaginary friends?"

Izuku tries to hide his journal behind his back, but Kacchan is stronger and faster and wrestles it away from him easily. At least he'll be quick, Izuku thinks. They're a few streets away from school, and the morning bell will ring in another fifteen minutes or so. Kacchan wouldn't risk being tardy, not even for the chance to mess with Izuku.

Kacchan flicks through the journal with an upturned lip. Izuku can't see how this will end with anything other than a destroyed journal, and he has to bite down on his lip to stop from crying, because he's put so much work into this journal. It's almost full. There are so many good notes about his friends in there.

Izuku opens his mouth to try and reason with him, even though he knows it's probably useless. "Kacchan, give it—give it back. Please."

"Why? You going to fucking cry if I don't? I can't believe you're still wasting your time on this childish bullshit—"

Kacchan cuts himself off. The journal is open to a random page—a sketch of Red from the last time Izuku had run into him. He sees Red every so often—not as often as Floaty Girl, Almost-Ingenium, or Ice Prince, who are the most frequent heroes, or even the Operator, who's made several reappearances since he first showed up, but it's not uncommon to see his sharp, friendly smile.

Kacchan grabs his shirt and hauls him close. Izuku has to go up on his tip toes to stay grounded.

"Who the fuck is this?"

"Wh—what?"

Kacchan shakes the journal. "This hero—who are they? How do you know them?"

"He's my friend, like all the others," Izuku says.

"The others?" Kacchan says.

"The other heroes. The ones that saved me."

"Your imaginary friends," Kacchan corrects.

"They're not imaginary. They're real. They saved me."

Kacchan glowers at him. There's something about his expression, about the way he's searching Izuku's face for some hint of a lie, that makes something in Izuku's chest unclench. Right now, Kacchan seems different. Less cruel.

Kacchan thumbs through the journal, sneering. "How many of these freaks are in here?"

Izuku doesn't need to think about it. He keeps a tally and he adds to it after every new encounter. "Seventeen."

"Seventeen," Kacchan says. "Are you bullshitting me right now?"

"No?"

Kacchan flicks back through the journal, his lip upturned. Izuku almost wants to ask him to be more gentle with his journal, but he thinks that might just encourage Kacchan to blow it up.

Kacchan purses his lips like he's sucked on a lemon. He shoves the journal back at Izuku. "Whatever. Fucking lame, shitty Deku. We're in middle school and you still have imaginary friends? Fucking hell."

He stalks off, hands shoved in his pockets. There are still five minutes until the morning bell will ring. Izuku clutches at his journal and stares after Kacchan, amazed that his journal is still in one piece.

There is a boy pinned under a villain's hand. The villain is a hulking metal exoskeleton. The boy is crying. Leaves stick in the boy's dark curls, and dirt is smudged over his freckles and down his ripped school uniform.

There is no one else on the street. No one here to save him.

Izuku picks up a fallen tree branch and mimics Kacchan's war cry. It cracks and sounds deranged rather than frightening, but it makes the villain turn away from the boy and settle those glowing eyes on Izuku.

Izuku thinks it's worked, but then the boy kicks out and tries to squirm out of the villain's grip. The villain curls a hand around the boy's throat, and the boy chokes and splutters as he fails to draw in air. Izuku is running before he's consciously made the decision to get between them. He pulls back, swings, and smacks the branch agains the metal back. The impact ricochets up his arm and into his teeth.

"Oh," says the villain, voice ringing hollowly. "I got it wrong. There you are, little hero."

The boy sobs around the fat metal fingers. Izuku's knees are trembling, but he keeps himself upright through sheer force of will, holding onto his branch even though he knows it would do nothing against the villain's metal plating.

The villain eyes the branch. "What were you planning on doing, hm?

You're only a child right now. Maybe you're almost in high school, but they say you developed late. Heroes are nothing until UA beats them into shape."

"I didn't have a plan," Izuku manages to say through chattering teeth. "I just—I—you were hurting him. I won't let you hurt him."

"You won't let me? I had though you might be different at this age, but you're exactly the same." The villain laughs and shakes the kid in his grip. Both Izuku and the kid cry out.

"Let him go," Izuku says. "Pl—please. Let him go."

"I got it so wrong. And to think, I almost killed what's probably going to be some unimportant salaryman and then *left*."

Izuku hefts his branch onto his shoulder, but before he can swing again, he's tackled to the ground. A woman in a leather jacket and dangly ears glares at the villain over Izuku's head. "Did you just run out at a villain, kid? Is that what I saw? Jesus Christ. You're the worst. Apparently, you've always been the worst."

"Um," Izuku says, before he shakes his head to clear it. "That boy—you have to help him. Please!"

When Izuku turns his head, he sees another person. When had he gotten there? He's covered in small animals—birds and cats and little mammals with sharp teeth. A lion crouches behind him. Its teeth are bared. Izuku squeaks like a mouse and clutches at the woman's leather jacket.

The animal-type hero waves at him with a smile. Weakly, Izuku waves back.

"I'll get the kid," says the earphone hero. "You go stand behind my friend. He doesn't bite. Neither do his animals. The lion is as soft as he is."

She confiscates Izuku's tree branch and hurls it off to one side.

"Hey," Izuku says.

She points a finger at him. "Don't even think about interfering, got it? You're, like, what? Nine?"

"Thirteen," Izuku says.

“Thirteen,” she says. “Christ. Okay, scram. Let my friend take care of you. And do not, for the love of fuck, try and fight this villain when you’re thirteen.”

Izuku blinks up at her. “I wouldn’t.”

She snorts like Izuku has said something funny. “Yeah, sure. Go.”

The heroes take care of the villain easily, though Izuku is a little disappointed that he didn’t get to see the lion in action. He got to pat it, though. It was like a large kitten, butting up against Izuku’s chest, wrapping itself around Izuku, long tail flicking his neck. (It isn’t until the heroes are gone, that Izuku wonders if the lion was there solely to provide rescue support. It seemed awfully fond of Izuku for reasons he can’t quite understand.)

“Thank you,” Izuku says before they leave.

“Are you thanking me for saving you or for saving the other kid?” asks Earphone.

“Uh,” Izuku says. “Both, I think. Why?”

She snorts. “Just sounds like something you’d do.”

Animal-Man says something in sign language that makes Earphone laugh again. Izuku tips his head to one side, and she translates, “No self-preservation?”

Izuku blinks up at them. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nevermind,” she says. “We’ll see you around. Stay out of trouble.”

“Wait.” They turn back around. Izuku offers out his journal. “Can I have your autographs?”

“It’s, uh.” Izuku fiddles with the buttons of his uniform. “It’s my birthday today.”

“That’s exciting, Izuku,” Floaty Girl says. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” Izuku says.

Floaty Girl and Ice Prince exchange unreadable glances. Izuku is used that. His friends often have silent conversations over his head.

“You’re getting grown up.” Floaty Girl sounds wistful, almost. “You’ll be fifteen soon.”

Ice Prince elbows her. “Fifteen does typically come after fourteen.”

“I mean,” she says, rubbing at her side, “that you’ll be in high school soon. That’s a big step. Are you nervous?”

Izuku chews on his lip. He looks at his shoes rather than at his friends, and nods, just the once.

There’s a beat. Then, Floaty Girl snatches up his hands and pulls him along the street. “We don’t have a present, but we need to celebrate your birthday somehow! Come on, we’ll buy you lunch. It is around lunchtime, isn’t it? What do you feel like?”

Ice Prince waits with the tied-up villains while Floaty Girl leads them deeper into the city. People stare as she passes, but Izuku is used to turning heads when he’s with his friends. It used to drive him crazy when he was younger—people can’t help but stare at his friends, so why don’t more people know about them as heroes? Anyone can tell at a glance that they’re amazing. Their faces should be plastered on every flat surface.

They get lunch at a nearby take-away restaurant. Floaty Girl’s burger is the size of her head. When Ice Prince meets back up with them, he only orders a vanilla milkshake.

They eat in the park near Izuku’s house, cross-legged on a grassy clearing. Izuku chews on his burger and palms at the dirt with his free hand. It’s dry. He remembers being held under floodwaters here. He remembers the burn of his lungs; the muddy sludge that had stuck to his clothes; the stick that carved a bloody line on his calf when he waded through the water by Froppy and Floaty Girl’s side.

Izuku lowers his burger.

“You haven’t gotten older,” he says.

Floaty Girl stiffens. Ice Prince puts down his milkshake.

“I don’t …” she begins, and then stops.

“I know you’re not going to tell me anything,” Izuku says. “You never do.”

Floaty Girl puts a hand on Izuku’s curls. He peeks up at her. She seems so apologetic, so hurt by Izuku’s disappointment, and he realises that maybe they don’t want to keep secrets from him. They’re not being mean. They’re not the type.

“We’re sorry,” Ice Prince says.

“So sorry,” Floaty Girl agrees. “It’s not because—we would tell you, if we could.”

“We can’t,” Ice Prince says.

“No,” Floaty Girl says with that terrible hurt expression, so different from her bubbly smile, “we can’t.”

Izuku drops his burger. Floaty Girl reaches for it, trying to stop it from being ruined by the dirt, but Izuku seizes her wrist. He has both of their attention, now. He’s surprised by his own boldness. The words are climbing up his throat, and he needs to say this—they need to know this.

“Thank you,” Izuku says. “Thank you for always saving me. Thank you for being there. Thank you for being my friends.”

“Oh,” Floaty Girl says. “Oh, Izuku …”

“You don’t need to thank us,” Ice Prince says.

Izuku shakes his head so hard his curls bounce around his cheeks. “No, I want to! You deserve to be thanked. So, uh. Thank you. Again.”

Floaty Girl lunges forward and drags him into a hug. It’s not the first time they’ve hugged. It’s not even the second.

Izuku is taller now. Not as tall as her, no where near as tall as Ice Prince or the others, like Yellow Might, but he’s taller than he had been when they first met almost ten years ago. Izuku is different, but Floaty Girl feels the same. She’s warm, and her jumpsuit is padded with armour, and she smells of ozone and vanilla perfume. She’s a good hugger. He wonders who taught her to hug like that—fiercely, like every hug is her last.

“Are there any more of you?” Izuku asks.

“How many have you met?” Floaty Girl asks.

“Nineteen.”

“No,” she says. “There’s no more. That’s everyone.”

Ice Prince hugs him when they leave. He’s the same, too. He’s two-temperatures, and smells faintly of smoke, and his hands are strong and long-fingered, like a piano player. He’s very pretty. Izuku has trouble looking at him, sometimes. His face feels hot when he does.

They wave goodbye to Izuku. He stands on the corner of the park and watches them go until they turn a corner and disappear. If he were to chase after them, to turn that same corner, he knows he would see an empty street. Neither of them would be in sight, as if they had never been there at all.

When he gets home, he writes sparse notes in his journal. They didn’t reveal much today, but every detail counts.

Nineteen heroes in total, Floaty Girl had said. Nineteen. What an odd number. Twenty he could understand—twenty would make sense. Twenty is class. But nineteen feels incomplete.

Izuku closes his eyes tight and pretends that he’s the missing piece. He shuts out visions of his middle school, with looming classmates and walls that start to close in when Izuku’s chest feels tight. He doesn’t think about Kacchan. He doesn’t even think about All Might.

He thinks about his nineteen friends. Today was the first time he spent a birthday with his friends since he was little and Mum had drafted invitations to all the kids in his pre-school class. That sunlight clearing in the local park should belong to a dream, but it was real; Izuku still remembers the tangy taste of the burger’s sauce, and the feel of grass under his hand, and the warmth of his friends dragging him into a hug.

He thinks about being the last puzzle piece to complete the mystery. He thinks about being the missing member of a group of twenty, rather than nineteen. He thinks about his friends knocking on the door and announcing that they’ll stay. That they’re not going to disappear again. That they think Izuku is worth sticking around for.

When he opens his eyes again, the vision fizzles out into nothing. His

cheeks are wet. He scrubs at his face and glowers at the journal, open to a drawing of Genesis and Earphone from the last time they teamed up to save him from a villain, but he can't bring himself to close it.

He's been dreaming of his friends since he was five years old. It shouldn't come as a surprise that he misses them so fiercely, that this ache in his chest has never gone away. It never will go away, he thinks. Not until his friends stay with him. Not that they ever will, though.

Izuku is used to having impossible dreams; he can live with one more.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Izuku opens the door to Class 1-A and, for a moment, he's sure that he's walked straight into a dream.

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for very brief speculation about suicide at the beginning of this chapter. If there are any other warnings that I missed, feel free to drop me a message.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku hasn't seen his friends in a while.

He saw them during the holidays. They had seemed different. The way they looked at them, the way they spoke to him—it had been *different*. They always seemed a little off—there was something about them that he couldn't put his finger on—but during the summer before his last year of middle school, that impression grew until Izuku had felt like there was something obvious that he was missing.

School has only been back a few weeks, but already, his teachers have started to talk about high school. Izuku misses his friends. Maybe they would listen, and understand, and not laugh when Izuku confesses that he wants to go to UA. They wouldn't get that flint-eyed smile their teacher wears when Izuku submits his preferences to UA, like he thinks Iuzku is a particularly small and amusing bug that's bashed itself on his window. They wouldn't crowd around him and snarl like Kacchan.

Kacchan has been getting twitchy now that high school applications are coming up. He's determined to make something of himself, just like Izuku, but sometimes Kacchan doesn't think.

—take a swan dive off the roof!

What would have happened if Izuku actually had? What would have happened to Kacchan's dream, then?

Izuku shakes his journal again. Water splatters onto his sneakers. He

stares at the little wet marks, and he can't help but wonder if his childhood friends would be waiting for him up on the roof if Izuku were to wind his way up there. That's a kind of rescue, isn't it?

Or maybe they would be waiting for him at the bottom. Maybe Ice Prince would freeze him to the building; or maybe Tape-Man would pluck him out of the air half way down; or maybe Shift Hands would be waiting at the bottom to catch him.

At least then, if they did show up, Izuku could talk to them again.

Izuku shoves that thought out his head. It doesn't matter what they would or would not do, because he's not going up to the roof. He's not. He's going home.

Most students have gone home for the day, but Izuku still takes a back-route so he won't run into Kacchan or his friends again. He rounds the corner, and realises that the school isn't as abandoned as he thought; there's someone lounging at the back of the school, leant up against the brick wall as if he belongs there.

"Is there a villain?" Izuku asks.

Grenades tips his head to one side, considering. He's still wearing a motorbike helmet. Izuku has never seen him without it, and he sometimes wonders if Grenades has a scar or disfigurement, or if there is something about his quirk that prevents him from baring his face to the world, like the centuries-old hero Izuku read about years ago. Scott Summers, Izuku recalls. Maybe Grenades's quirk is like Scott Summers?

"Not right now," Grenades says.

Izuku squints at him suspiciously. "What are you doing here, then?"

Grenades snorts. "You've gotten confident. Hope we didn't change too much."

Izuku presses the still-dripping hero journal to his chest. He can still feel the phantom touch of Kacchan's scorching fingers on his shoulder.

"I'm not confident. Not at all."

"Not yet," Grenades corrects. "I'm here to keep the others off your back. I don't think they'll show up, but, well. I don't want to risk it."

“I thought you said there weren’t any villains around?”

“I’m not talking about villains,” Grenades says. “I’m talking about the others. The heroes.”

“You’re … stopping the heroes from coming?” Izuku is suddenly aware that he doesn’t know Grenades as well as the others. He has never even seen his face. Izuku reaches for his backpack. It’s not much, but he could throw it at Grenades and make a run for it if he had to.

A laugh scrapes its way up Grenades throat.“Calm down, brat. I’m a hero. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Then why—”

“I meant that you’re going to be on your own today,” Grenades says. “The others are—they’re busy. Okay? They’re busy. So you’re going to be on your own today.”

“You don’t look busy,” Izuku says, “and you said you were stopping the others from coming to see me, not that they couldn’t come in the first place.”

Grenades shakes his head. He mumbles something that sounds a lot like, *“You little shit”* under his breath, and then crouches down in front of Izuku and lays his hands on Izuku’s shoulders.

He’s fourteen, too old to be treated like a toddler, but Izuku goes lax under his touch anyway, and lets Grenade’s gentle hold replace the phantom feel of Kacchan’s hands exploding against his body.
“I know this is confusing,” Grenades says. “Do you trust me?”

Along with Red, Grenades was one of the first heroes that Izuku met, but he’s always seemed distant, like he doesn’t want to get close to Izuku. Or, maybe, like he doesn’t know how to.

But Grenades has been popping in and out of his life since he was six. If he wanted to hurt Izuku, he could have done it during those long eight years. Izuku isn’t a little kid, anyway. He can fight back, now. Kind of.

“Yes,” Izuku says.

Grenades nods. “Then believe me when I say the heroes can’t come today. I can’t explain, but …”

“It’s okay,” Izuku says, and pulls on a smile. He can’t see his face, but he can tell from the line of his body that Grenades is stressed. Worried. “Do you want to go get milkshakes? I’ll pay. I have some of my allowance money left.”

“I can’t,” Grenade says. “I’m leaving soon. Do you understand what I’m saying, brat? You’re on your own today.”

Grenades doesn’t sound mean as he turns down Izuku’s offer; he sounds urgent, almost.

“Uh, okay, then. I’ll see you later.”

Grenades lets go off his shoulders and steps back. “Go home, Izuku.”

Grenades watches him go until Izuku turns the corner and heads out of sight. Izuku stares at the ground and tries to piece together what that conversation had meant.

Sometimes, the heroes will drop by without the threat of a villain attack looming over their heads. Izuku thinks that they do regular patrols or, maybe, they come by just to spend time with him. Maybe they’re doing both at once. It’s hard to tell. They never fully answer his questions when he asks.

But the heroes are often gone for months at a time. Izuku hasn’t seem them since the holidays. He hadn’t expected to see them today. So why did Grenades come to his school just to tell him that he wasn’t going to get a visit from anyone else today?

Izuku doesn’t notice the villain, until slime is wrapping around his legs. It climbs up to his chest, and then his mouth and nose. Slime slips between his teeth. He can’t see the villain’s face, but he can hear his mean laughter.

Izuku can’t breathe. He can’t scream for help. He claws at the slime, trying to pry himself loose, but there is nothing solid to hold onto.

The heroes can’t come, Grenades had said. *You’re on your own today.*

For the first time in his life, Izuku is left at the mercy of a villain. He chokes and reaches out with one arm like he’s trying to pull someone in being.

His friends have always come when he was in danger. Villains are rarely able to touch him. But now, his vision is blurring out, and

there's slime under his tongue. It's in his throat. In his lungs.

His friends aren't coming. Maybe they're never coming again. Maybe they've abandoned him. Maybe—

Izuku passes out as a loud, familiar laugh echoes down the tunnel.

For a moment, Izuku wonders if All Might is a part of his group of heroes. Does All Might know his friends?

There's something about All Might that reminds him of his childhood friends. Izuku doesn't know what it is that gives him that feeling, until steam billows out in a thick cloud and All Might shrinks, and Izuku realises—he has a secret. This is why he reminds him of his friends: he is trying to hide something from Izuku. It's a different kind of secret, but a secret nonetheless.

He hadn't told his friends that he was quirkless—he could never bare to bring it up—but he tells All Might.

When All Might tells him no, he wishes he hadn't. He wishes he had stayed behind the shaded gymnasium with Grenades, had sat down in the dirt next to his boots, even if Grenades hadn't wanted him around. Anything would have been better than this.

Kacchan is trapped in the villain's vicious body. His mouth is covered, but his eyes—his eyes are screaming out for help.

Izuku waits, frozen on the wrong side of the crowd, but none of his friends appear. Then he remembers: they're not going to appear. Not today.

The heroes that are here aren't doing anything. Their quirks are incompatible with the villain, so they're just hovering there, watching on while Kacchan silently screams for help.

For the second time that day, Izuku realises his friends aren't coming to save him from this villain. He's alone. Kacchan's alone.

His legs move on their own.

All Might corners him on the street turned orange by the setting sun and offers him his quirk. After that day, Izuku is caught up in training, and studying for entrance exams, and talking with All Might—*All Might*—like he's a normal person instead of the man who helped shaped society into what it is today. A month passes, then two, then six. One day, Izuku wakes up and realises he hasn't seen his childhood friends in almost a year.

Normally, by the time All Might makes it to the beach, Izuku is already busy straining to drag junk four times his size through the sand. Today, though, he's running late.

All Might stares up at the trash pile as though he expects Izuku to come hurdling over the garbage. Izuku leaps over the half-wall separating the beach from the street and sprints across the sand. His whole face is probably flushed from running all the way there.

"Sorry," Izuku gasps out. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," All Might says. "You weren't that late, just try and be more punctual next time." Izuku dumps his backpack and rolls up his sleeves. All Might hesitates before adding, "Can I ask why you were

late, though? Are you struggling to stay on top of your schoolwork—I probably wouldn't be much help with homework, since it's been so long since I was in school myself, but if you need extra time to dedicate yourself to your studies, we could look at your schedule and rearrange some things."

"It's not schoolwork. It's a personal project, I guess." Izuku drops the rubber tire he had picked up, and wipes his hands on his pants. "Actually, can I ask you a few questions?"

"Go ahead."

Izuku rifles through his backpack until he finds his well-loved notebook. He flips through it until he finds the right page and opens it up so All Might can see.

"This is Floaty Girl—or, well, I call her Floaty Girl. I don't actually know her name."

Izuku flips to another page. "This is Ice Prince. Again, I don't actually know his name? But Ice Prince seems to fit him."

Izuku continues like that, flicking through the pages with reverence, and introduces All Might to his nineteen friends. When they reach the end, Izuku holds his journal to his chest and peeks up at All Might, suddenly shy.

"Do you recognise any of them? Have you … have you met them before?"

"I'm sorry," All Might says, "but no, I don't know them. Except this one."

He takes Izuku's book and flips back to Almost-Ingenium. This tells Izuku nothing. If he were to ask a stranger on the street to flip through his journal, they would probably pass over every one of his friends aside from Almost-Ingenium, the only half-recognisable hero in the group.

"Ingenium," All Might says. "He's a hero in Hosu City. I met him once or twice before, I think."

"That's not him, though." Izuku points at the legs. "Ingenium has engines in his arms, while this hero, this Almost-Ingenium, has engines in his legs. Plus, his armour is slightly different."

“Hero costumes change over the years,” All Might says. “A hero’s suit may look very different ten years down the road. Are you sure that this person you encountered had engines in their legs? Maybe you made a mistake. Memories can be tricky things.”

“It’s not a mistake,” Izuku says.

“Well, you can’t believe everything you read on the internet. Stranger danger and all that—”

“I didn’t read it online.” Izuku takes his book back. “Thanks, anyway, All Might. It was a reach to think that I could answer all my questions at once by asking someone else after all these years of researching. It was stupid of me.”

Izuku had known All Might probably wouldn’t be able to tell him anything. None of his friends had admitted to having a connection with All Might—though Izuku knew that he couldn’t trust everything that they told him—and it wouldn’t make sense for nineteen heroes that the rest of the world doesn’t believe exists to be closely related to All Might, the Symbol of Peace, one of the most recognisable celebrities in Japan, if not the world.

“Young Midoriya,” All Might says.

Izuku dredges up a smile. “It’s okay. I’ve been trying to find these heroes since I was little. No one else knows that they exist. I shouldn’t have put pressure on you to know them, either.”

All Might squints out at the trash pile, haloed by the sinking afternoon sun. “Heroes that the rest of the world are unaware of? That does sound familiar, actually.”

“They’re not underground heroes,” Izuku says. “Most of their quirks aren’t even suited for that kind of work.”

“No,” All Might says, “that’s not what I meant. When I younger, well before I joined UA, I ran into a group of heroes that no one else knew existed.”

Izuku perks up. “Really? What were they like?”

“I never saw their faces,” All Might says. “They wore matching jumpsuits and helmets that covered their faces and necks—dark coloured and nondescript. I almost thought they were villains trying to rob me, at first, but no. They took down a few villains and then ran

out of there before I had a chance to talk to them."

"Helmets?" Izuku flips his journal open and holds up the picture of Grenades. "One of my heroes wears a bike helmet!"

"It wasn't a bike helmet. It was more like a proper hero's helmet, something made by a support agency, but there was nothing else I could use to identify them."

"Did you ever find out who they were?" Izuku asks.

"No," All Might says. "They weren't underground heroes. I asked around. I always thought that maybe they worked for some kind of …"

"Covert operation?" Izuku suggests. All Might nods, yes. Izuku sighs and puts his journal away. "I don't think it's that for my heroes, at least. They're too noticeable to be chosen for secret missions."

"I'm sorry," All Might says.

"It's okay," Izuku says again.

All Might must feel bad about not being able to help. He lays a large hand on Izuku's curls, and says awkwardly, "The thing I said about stranger danger is still important. Don't give out personal details about your life or meet up with someone you met online. You don't actually know who they are—"

Izuku laughs. "Thanks, Dad. I know."

They both stiffen. Izuku can feel heat his cheeks heat up. It might be a trick of the light, but he thinks All Might flushes pink, too.

"I—I—I had better get training," Izuku chokes out, waving his hands around so fiercely that he almost smacks All Might in the stomach. "I was late, and there's only so much time! Yup. Training. Plus ultra."

Izuku ducks under All Might's arm and sprints up the side of the garbage pile, making a bee-line for the rotting pot-plants at the very top. If Izuku hadn't run off, he might have seen All Might staring at his hand, forgetting about Izuku's battered notebook as he instead memorised the phantom feel of Izuku's coarse curls against his fingers.

Izuku is so worked up about the entrance exam that he almost misses her. He *would* have missed her if she hadn't tapped him before he fell face-first into the sidewalk. The feeling of weightlessness and the accompanying rush of excitement is the same as when he was five years old. She's almost the same, too—bubbly smile, and flushed cheeks, and bouncy brown hair. Her face is rounder and her hair is shorter than he remembers, but it's her. It's her. Floaty Girl.

Floaty Girl if she was a teenager.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

Izuku chokes on his own tongue. He's too overwhelmed to get out anything coherent before she's wishing him luck and skipping away.

Izuku walks into the auditorium and finds his assigned seat in a daze, barley registering Kacchan grinding his teeth in the seat beside his. His thoughts are a mess.

How is this possible? He had always thought Floaty Girl was an adult. She had definitely been an adult the last time he saw her. Even if she had been a young teenager when she first saved him, almost ten years has passed since then and the girl who stopped his fall looked as though she was Izuku's age. If she looks somewhere around fourteen to sixteen now, then she would have to have been roughly five years olds when he first met her, and she definitely *hadn't been*—

Floaty Girl must have a younger sister or cousin. That's the only explanation that makes sense. Siblings often look alike and have similar quirks. It would also explain why the girl didn't recognise him.

Should he track down the girl with the anti-gravity quirk? Would it be too invasive to ask about her older sister—

"You there!"

Izuku's head snaps up. The auditorium is silent. A tall boy in glasses is glaring at him over rows and rows of seats. Izuku chokes on his spit.

Is that Almost-Ingenium?

Okay. New theory. None of this is real and Izuku has begun to

hallucinate from the stress of it all. He's probably face-down somewhere in the street and only imagined heading out to take the entrance exam. Did All Might's hair do this to him?

Izuku's head hurts.

Floaty Girl's sister and the boy that yelled at him are both at the same testing area as Izuku. He tries to edge around the crowd of students to talk to her, but the tall boy seeks him out.

"You shouldn't disrupt exam goers!"

Izuku stares up at the boy while he lectures him. He's tall. His blue hair is neat and well-groomed. He has a square jaw, and glasses, and engines in his legs, and Izuku definitely knows this boy.

"Almost-Ingenium?"

The boy stops. "Excuse me? Ingenium is my older brother."

Older brother. Of course, this boy is also Izuku's age, and so he cannot be the person that first rushed Izuku to safety all those years ago. Except—

"Ingenium has engines in his arms," Izuku says.

The boy gives him a strange look. "Yes, quirks often mutate slightly as they are passed from parent to child, and so it's rare for siblings to have identical quirks. But we aren't here to discuss my family. You should stop attempting to distract everyone around you. You may not take this seriously, but the rest of us—"

Present Mic cuts through Almost-Almost-Ingenium's lecture. The test begins abruptly, while Izuku is still staring up at the boy in dazed horror, trying to slot together decade-old puzzle pieces.

Izuku runs blindly into the testing arena. He can't blow this. All Might is counting on him. He can't get distracted—

Prince Charming is here.

Like Almost-Almost-Ingenium and Floaty Girl's sister, he is Izuku's age. His hair is shorter and instead of a billowing cape, he's wearing a tracksuit, but the navel beam and french accent are unmistakable. The teenager even winks at Izuku, the same way Prince Charming used to wink at him when he was younger.

Three young versions of his childhood heroes have appeared within the space of a few hours. What does this mean?

Izuku flails in the middle of the chaotic exam. He's too worked up. His hands are getting all cold and sweaty, and there's not enough air, and his brain won't shut up—

A towering robot thunders down the street. All the other students turn tail and run. Izuku spots Floaty Girl's sister trapped beneath rubble, struggling to free herself.

His mind blanks out. His feet move on their own.

In the weeks after the entrance exam, Izuku throws himself into theorising to take his mind off his crumbling dream. He speeds through a fresh notebook while writing up notes and brainstorming and sketching the three teenagers he ran into at the exam. Nothing adds up. No matter how many times he goes over the facts, none of it makes sense.

What is the chance of all three of his childhood heroes—three heroes who no one else seems to know of, including All Might—having siblings his age who all decided to take the UA entrance exam?

It doesn't sound too impossible. Plenty of heroes have younger siblings and many children of hero families are encourage to go into heroics. But how could they all have identical quirks as their older counterparts? Why is Izuku the only person that knows Floaty Girl and Prince Charming exist? Why does he remember a slightly different Ingenium to the rest of the world?

In April, Izuku starts his high school career.

UA's campus is huge. When he finally arrives at Class 1-A, he pauses outside the door.

Kacchan was accepted into the hero course, too. Izuku is dreading coming across him during school, doubly so if they end up being assigned to the same class, but he's stronger, now. He's not a quirkless kid left behind by the rest of the world. He can face Kacchan head on.

But he can't stop thinking about the three teenagers who look eerily similar to Floaty Girl, Almost-Ingenium, and Prince Charming, the kids related to his childhood heroes in some way. Did they pass the entrance exam? They must have. Izuku can't imagine a world in which they failed. Will they be in his class? How does he act normal around them if they are?

Izuku takes a steadying breath. He can't get lost in his head. He almost failed the entrance exam because he overthought everything. He can't sabotage his high school career, too.

Izuku opens the door to Class 1-A and, for a moment, he's sure that he's walked straight into a dream.

Baby-faced versions of his childhood friends are seated in neat rows. They're dressed in matching uniforms and wearing bland expressions as they watch Almost-Almost Ingenium—Iida Tenya, the boy says—bicker with Kacchan.

There is Alien Queen. Her pink skin looks even brighter against the grey of the uniform blazer. And there is Electro with his yellow hair, a streak of black zigzagging through his fringe. There is Earphone, twirling her ears around one finger.

There, right in front of him, is over half of his childhood heroes, staring as Izuku chokes on air. His mouth is open but no sound is coming out, just the hollow rattle of air sucked through his lungs.

"Good morning." Almost-Almost-Ingenium marches over to meet him. "I'm from Somei Private Academy. My name is—"

"I heard," Izuku interrupts, and then immediately regrets it. That

sounded rude. He doesn't want them to think he's rude. He continues on bravely, "I'm Midoriya. Nice to meet you, Iida."

Iida praises him for realising there was more to the exam when, in fact, Midoriya had been running on blind instinct for the entire ten minutes.

"Oh, that curly hair!" Izuku spins around and almost swallows his tongue. Floaty Girl's sister. "You're the plain-looking one. You passed, just like Present Mic said."

She looks good in her uniform. Iida looks good in it, too. Tall and fit and attractive, like they were born to wear these uniforms, unlike Izuku, who twisted his tie into a too short knot and spent almost twenty minutes staring at himself in the mirror, trying to come to terms with his reflection. Standing in his bathroom while wearing the nationally famous UA uniform made him feel like an alien. An impostor.

But none of his classmates look ruffled. They're calm, bored almost, when Izuku's head is spinning, because he's at UA, he has a quirk, and he's surrounded by over a dozen teenagers who look like the spitting image of his childhood heroes.

"Go somewhere else if you want to play at making friends. This is the hero course."

Their homeroom teacher is bundled up in a yellow sleeping bag on the floor, sucking at a juice packet. This isn't the oddest thing to happen to Izuku today and it isn't even 9am. At least he doesn't recognise this shaggy man from years-old memories. If, say, the Operator was his homeroom teacher, Izuku might have finally broke down crying right there in the doorway.

The quirk assessment is stressful and requires his full concentration, but Izuku spends the time gazing at his classmates with quiet wonder. His chest hurts. There's something too-big there, pressing up against his ribs, and he doesn't know why.

This doesn't feel like the time he first met All Might. That had felt like exploding from the inside out, like his entire life had been leading up to the moment that he was on his knees and choking on bile and slime, looking up at his idol and struggling to find words.

This feels like accidentally stumbling across old friends. This feels like re-watching a favourite childhood series and re-discovering why you

were so enthralled with this world, these characters. This is coming home to find a long lost family member sat at the kitchen table, only to realise that they can't remember who you are.

Izuku wrenches his eyes away from Shift Hands, who's strength grip reached over 500 kilograms like it was nothing, and accidentally catches Aizawa's eye. He's staring at him. Watching him. How long has he been doing that?

Izuku passes the quirk assessment, but barely.

Today is their first block of hero training, lead by All Might. They're receiving their costumes this morning. The too-big feeling in his chest is back. It's a feeling that Izuku has been carrying since he first woke up to water in his ears and All Might's smile swimming above him.

Izuku changes into his costume in a trance. Mum made this for him. It's a tribute for the two heroes in his life—his mum and All Might—and he will wear it with pride.

He has to take a moment in the change rooms to breathe and calm himself down, in case he starts crying in front of his classmates. By the time he's dressed, everyone is already down at Ground Beta, grouped in front of All Might, admiring each other's costumes.

Izuku jogs out of the tunnel. His class comes into view, and suddenly the afternoon sun seems ice-cold, freezing Izuku right through.

Uraraka meets him at the mouth of the tunnel, dressed in her own hero costume. A bubbly, soft pink costume—a costume similar to the one he has known for ten years. A costume almost like the one he has sketched over and over again. Floaty Girl's costume.

Uraraka claps her hands together and smiles like she isn't in the process of destroying Izuku's mind. "Deku! Your costume looks cool. Really down to Earth."

"Your costume," Izuku says, ignoring the compliment that might normally make him too flustered to piece together a coherent

sentence. “It’s—it’s—”

Uraraka rubs at the back of her head. “I should’ve written down what I wanted. I ended up getting a skintight bodysuit. It’s embarrassing …”

“No, you look great. Battle ready and also very pretty,” Izuku says on autopilot. He’s too overwhelmed to be self-conscious. Uraraka isn’t. She flushes behind her translucent visor. “Was it inspired by something? Someone? An existing hero or a family member?”

“I was too busy and too nervous to think of anything concrete that I wanted. Not like everyone else.” Uraraka plays with the baubles wrapped around her wrist. Izuku’s heart twists. The gesture is so familiar. “I wrote down my quirk and my measurements and that I liked heroes with space aesthetics, and they created this, I suppose.”

“You look great, Uraraka!” Iida’s voice floats through a solid helmet. Uraraka shakes off her nervousness and jumps around Iida, complimenting his costume, while Iida stands tall and pretends not to be as pleased by the praise as he clearly is.

Izuku unsticks his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “Iida. Your costume. It was inspired by your brother, right?”

“Ingenium, yes,” Iida says, standing up even straighter. “I am honoured to be a part of the Iida family. My brother is the person I look up to the most.”

“So cool!” Uraraka says again.

What does this mean? Izuku’s hands itch. He wishes he had his notebook with him so he could write all of his down. He’s going to need another journal soon. He’s gotten more notes about this mystery in the past few months than he has had in years.

Uraraka floats away to compliment a few other girls on their costumes and Iida strides away to scold someone for playing around with their suit. Izuku stands there, a few feet out of the tunnel, staring out at his class.

All of them are dressed like his childhood heroes. All of them, aside from Mineta, who doesn’t resemble anyone from his past, and Todoroki, who’s features match the Ice Prince, but who’s all-white costume is different from the blue jumpsuit Izuku remembers, and Kacchan, who—

Kacchan, who is wearing orange, green, and black. Kacchan, who has the familiar orange cross over his chest, and the grey kneepads, and the clunky grenades strapped over his gloves.

Kacchan has an explosion quirk. Izuku remembers being off-balanced at the similarities between his saviour's quirk and the quirk used against him every other day in elementary school. Maybe it's not similar. Maybe it's the same quirk. The same—

All Might calls the class to order. Izuku makes his way through the crowd of classmates on autopilot. All Might's instructions wash over him, all white-noise, because he's too busy staring at his classmates, who look like miniature replicas of his childhood heroes. There's Froppy, her tongue hanging out of her mouth, dressed in yellow and green. There's Prince Charming with his costume glinting in the sun. There's Yellow Might in his banana-yellow suit. There's Earphone, and Alien Queen, and Red. And Grenade's green and orange costume on Kacchan.

The costume's aren't identical to the ones Izuku remembers. Kaminari's costume is black and white with silver highlights, where Electro's suit was predominately silver. Izuku remembers the way his metallic jumpsuit caught the sunlight when he played with him, glittering like a discoball. Floaty Girl's costume was almost entirely pale pink, where Uraraka has more than one colour in her's. Yaoyorozu's costume is entirely different to Gensis's. She doesn't even have pants right now.

"Hero costumes change over the years," All Might had said months ago on that trash-heaped beach, staring down at Izuku's battered hero journal. "*A hero's suit may look very different ten years down the road."*

Izuku's throat closes up.

No. No, it can't be.

Izuku's eyes flick to Kacchan, glowering at the ground instead of looking at any of their classmates or All Might, his fists clenched, practically vibrating with pent-up energy.

If this insane theory holds true, then that would mean that—

No.

All Might starts sectioning off the class into pairs. Izuku wants to crawl away and find an classroom empty, curl into a tight ball, and

scream into his hands. He can't do that, even if it feels like his brain is melting out of his ears. His childhood friends are precious to him, but his dream, his burning, beautiful dream of being a hero, is everything. He can't fall to pieces now.

Izuku shoves his hand in the air. "Uh, All Might? Can you please repeat the instructions? I didn't, um, hear any of that."

"Overwhelmed, young Midoriya?" All Might asks. Izuku laughs shakily and rubs at the back of his head. The class titters behind him. It sounds good-natured. Someone behind him says that they're overwhelmed, too. He thinks it might be Electro.

At the back of the class, Kacchan doesn't mock him for being spacey. They're divided into pairs, and when Kacchan and Iida circle around them to head into the building, Kacchan gives him a look that Izuku can't decipher.

Kacchan confronts him that afternoon, after Izuku is released from the nurse's office. He can't remember the last time he saw Kacchan cry.

After everything comes out about One for All, Kacchan opens his mouth to say something else, but then, after glancing at All Might, snaps it shut again.

"Is there anything else, young Bakugou?" All Might asks. "This is a safe space—feel free to share anything! Honesty is a valuable trait in a hero."

Kacchan looks at Izuku. He's been looking at him since he was accepted into UA, trying to work out how Izuku had passed the exam without a quirk, but this seems different, somehow. Kacchan doesn't look like he wants to incinerate Izuku. His gaze is searching, almost.

Izuku swallows. "Kacchan?"

Kacchan rubs tears and snot off his chin, and then sneers. "No. I have nothing to say to either of you fuckers. I'll beat you to the top—no matter who you are, or what shitty quirk you've been given, or what

you did when I was a kid."

All Might doesn't seem to know what to do with Kacchan. Was he this awkward with Izuku at first, or had it been different for them? He doesn't remember. Most of his memories of that time in his life is blurry with shock, hero-worship, and sheer exhaustion.

"Friendly competition can be healthy," All Might says. "In correct dosages, of course."

"Get fucked," Kacchan tells All Might, their mutual idol, their teacher, before turning on his heel and jogging away.

"A very brash young man," All Might says, mostly to himself.

Izuku stares after Kacchan, broken arm cradled to his chest. His heavy cast presses against a bruise the size of a fist on his sternum.

"Yeah," Izuku says, "you could say that."

It takes Izuku a while to ask them. He's thought about the questions he wants to ask over and over. He turns the problem over in his head during class, staring at the back of his classmates' heads; and during training exercises, almost getting knocked out because he's too distracted by the familiar quirks being activated around him; and at night, in his own bed, staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep.

In the end, he blurts it out on the way to an off-campus training exercise.

"Do you have any siblings?"

If Asui is bothered by the strange, nervous boy in her class that just shouted a question in her face, she doesn't show it. "I do. I have a younger brother and sister."

"Younger? Not older?"

"No," Asui says evenly. "Midoriya, you're very sweaty. Ribbit."

Izuku turns to someone else on the bus. “What about you, Kirishima? Siblings?”

“Nah, I’m an only child,” Kirishima says. “I’m totally jealous, though. I’ve always wanted siblings to play with. Being an older brother sounds so manly. In the end, my parents only ever had me, though.”

Izuku jerks to his feet, hands balled up into fists, and shouts, “Does anyone here have siblings?”

“Woah, what’s gotten into Midoriya?” Kaminari asks.

“Maybe it’s nerves?” Kirishima suggests.

“I think this is just his personality,” Asui says. “He’s very enthusiastic. Ribbit.”

No one is answering him, so Izuku barrels on, panic creeping into his tone, “Raise your hand if you have any older siblings!”

“Yeah, no,” Kaminari says, “he’s definitely lost it.”

Obediently, several people raise their hand. Not nearly enough, though. A few people start talking about younger siblings or what it is like being an only child, so Izuku says again, near-frantic, “Older cousins?”

“What a strange and chaotic energy Midoriya is radiating,” Tokoyami says to no one in particular.

A few more people raise their hands. There’s still a third of the class missing, though. It’s like Izuku is accumulating puzzle pieces of all different shapes and sizes and none of them match up, all of the clues pointing to a different theory. It makes Izuku’s head hurt.

From the front of the bus, Aizawa says, “Sit down. We aren’t there yet.”

He barely raises his voice, but Izuku squeaks and sits down so fast his curls bounce around his face. Kirishima reaches around Asui and pats him on the shoulder. His smile is kind, though awkward, like he doesn’t quite know how to help the weird boy who takes nonsensical surveys on the way to training simulations, which makes sense. This whole situation must seem crazy from an outside perspective.

“Are you okay, Midoriya?” Ashido asks. Izuku nods at her stiffly.

“Tone down the energy a little bit,” Kaminari advises.

Izuku looks away from them just in time to catch Aizawa watching him through the overhead mirror.

Izuku had been planning on asking more questions at lunch, but the villain attack ruins that.

For the third time in his life, Izuku runs into villains and his childhood friends don’t melt out of the shadows to beat them into the ground and whisk Izuku off to safety. This time, it’s Izuku that fights for his friends’ lives. He half-expects to turn and see his classmates’ adult-counterparts beside him, but he never does. They’re all as young and frightened as he is.

At one point, Shigaraki reaches for Asui and Izuku goes numb. A part of his brain shuts down, flooded with adrenaline.

“Froppy,” he chokes out, and then, “*Smash!*”

All Might arrives soon after. His classmates slump over or cry out in relief, and it’s strange, seeing the exhausted hope on the faces of people who have always been the ones to save *him*.

A few days after the USJ attack, Izuku is pulled aside by two people. The first is Asui.

She corners him in the cafeteria. “You called me Froppy,” she says.

Izuku avoids looking her in the eye, gripping his lunch tray like a shield. “What? No, I didn’t.”

“Yesterday, when the villain with the decaying quirk was reaching for me.” Asui watches him evenly. She’s too observant. She can probably see every drop of sweat beading at his temples. “You said ‘Froppy.’ How did you know my hero name?”

“Your what?” Izuku asks, strangled.

“Froppy,” she says it so casually, Izuku almost doesn’t understand, at

first. “I decided that I wanted my hero name to be Froppy when I was a kid. I’ve never told anyone here that. How did you know?”

“I didn’t,” Izuku says, trying to keep his voice steady. “You—you must have misheard.”

“I didn’t mishear,” Asui says.

“It was very traumatic. It was hard to make sense of what happened.”

With that, Izuku turns on his heel and flees. Asui doesn’t chase him, but she does watch him during class, like she’s waiting for him to explode. Izuku pretends not to see. He does feel a little bit like he will explode every time he sees her staring at him from of the corner of his eye.

Aizawa returns to teaching a few days after the attack, swathed in bandages. He doesn’t have any trouble keeping them all in line, even with his injuries.

After the bell rings at the end of the day, Aizawa dismisses the class, and then says, “Midoriya. Stay behind.”

Izuku gathers his things and stands in front of Aizawa.

“You’ve acting strange,” Aizawa begins. “More strange than any fifteen year old should be acting. You’re constantly unbalanced by your classmates, and I keep catching you staring at them like you’re waiting for something to happen. At first, I thought you had poor social skills, but that’s not it. You were odd yesterday, too. More odd than usual.”

His eyes bore straight into Izuku’s. He wonders if Aizawa’s stare seems heavier than most people’s because his quirk is located in his eyes, or if that’s just the kind of person Aizawa is.

“Explain,” Aizawa says.

“Uh,” Izuku says.

“Don’t lie to me,” Aizawa says before Izuku can think of an excuse. “Did you know about the villain attack before it happened?”

“No!” Izuku realises how bad this must seem—acting suspicious in the week before villains infiltrated a high security school. “It’s … it’s hard to explain.”

“Try.”

Izuku dries his sweaty palms on his uniform blazer, swallows, and then begins, “When I was five, I was almost attacked by a villain, and two heroes jumped in to save me. Those two heroes were Uraraka and Todoroki.”

“Excuse me?” Aizawa says.

“A few months later,” Izuku continues, “I was attacked again. Three heroes saved me before the villain could touch me. It was Ashido, Kaminari, and Sero. Then Iida saved me from a runaway truck, and Asui and Uraraka saved me from drowning, and then Tokoyami and Shoji saved me sometime after that. The average person only has two or three encounters with villains in their life, but I’ve had half a dozen every *year* since I was little. For ten years, villains have been trying to attack me, and heroes have been jumping in to save me. Heroes that look like …”

Izuku scrubs a hand through his hair. Aizawa isn’t looking at him like he wants to string him up anymore, but Izuku stills squirms under his dark-eyed stare.

“After so many villain attacks, why weren’t placed in witness protection?” Aizawa asks.

“That’s the thing,” Izuku says, “I never talked to the police. The heroes never recorded these events. And every time I would go home and look up the heroes that saved me and … and I’ve never come across any record that says they exist. Until I came here.”

“What do you mean?”

Izuku wets his lips. Putting it into words makes this whole thing real, even if it must sound crazy to someone who hasn’t lived it. “The others in my class—it’s them. Every one of them, aside from Mineta, are the heroes that saved me.”

“The heroes that saved you,” Aizawa says, “how old were they?”

“In their late twenties, I think,” Izuku says.

“And your theory?” Aizawa says.

Izuku hesitates. He wets his lips again, and says, “Time travel.”

Aizawa doesn't flinch away, even though Izuku feels like he's unravelling. This is a truth that Izuku has been too scared to say aloud, to even write down, because then, he would have to consider it, *really* consider it, rather than shoving it deep down whenever the thought crossed his mind.

It's insane, but it's the only explanation that makes sense.

"You were visited by eighteen heroes?" Aizawa asks.

"Nineteen. One is missing."

"Who?" Aizawa says.

"A hero with a brainwashing quirk. He might have just been an underground hero, but I'm fairly familiar with underground heroes, and I've never seen anyone mention a hero like him. And he referenced the other heroes, too, so I know that they all know each other."

Aizawa is silent. Izuku fidgets, fingers curling and uncurling in the hem of his blazer.

Aizawa leans back against his desk. Izuku gets the impression that he would be rubbing at his temples if both his arms weren't bound in slings. Finally, Aizawa says, "Fuck."

Izuku jumps. "Sir?"

"Don't repeat this to anyone," Aizawa says. "The time travelling or my swearing."

"So it is, then?" Izuku's heart is beating quickly. It feels like it might thud right out of his chest. "It's time travel. My classmates are really—they're really time travelling? They're—"

"Breathe, Midoriya."

Izuku sucks in a sharp inhale. "Sorry. I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't apologise," Aizawa says. "I imagine this is overwhelming, but don't stress yourself out over it. It's out of our hands, regardless. So long as you don't reveal any information to others, especially your classmates, and you don't go out of your way to change the timeline, everything will be okay."

"Change the timeline?" Izuku repeats, feeling weak.

“You’re not the chaotic type.” Aizawa pauses, and then corrects himself. “Not the chaotically *evil* type, rather. Everything will be fine.”

He bids Izuku goodbye and sends him on his way. Aizawa still looks tired, though. More tired than usual.

As Izuku leaves, he hears Aizawa mumble under his breath, “This class is going to be the death of me.”

Izuku remembers the Ice Prince being composed, cool, but never cold. Todoroki barely looks at Izuku and when he does, it’s distant, like he is calculating Izuku’s worth, and finding him wanting.

Izuku is stood in the doorway before class. He watches Kirishima and Kaminari talk to Kacchan—Kaminari looks as though he’s poking a sleeping bear and enjoying every minute twitch of Kacchan’s eye, while Kirishima genuinely seems to be enjoying Kacchan’s presence. It’s not that Kaminari doesn’t enjoy Kacchan’s presence, of course, but Kirishima brightens under Kacchan’s gaze like a flower tipping their face to the sun. Izuku thinks he could recognise them as Red and Grenades from that look alone.

To his credit, Kacchan doesn’t push either of them away. There are a few members of their class that Kacchan seems to have endless patience for.

He doesn’t notice how long he’s been standing there, until Todoroki says from behind him, “You’re blocking the doorway. Move.”

Izuku jumps out of the way, almost tripping over his own feet, and Todoroki breezes past him without a second glance. It’s a little rude, sure, but for most of his school life, Izuku has dealt with much worse. For some reason, though, Izuku is left staring after Todoroki’s retreating back, throat closing up.

Todoroki is different to the Ice Prince. Izuku could let that get to him. He could take this as a sign of broken friendship and give up, but then, he has never been very good at giving up, even when everyone else tells him that he should.

Instead, Izuku leans against the doorway, watches Todoroki breeze through the crowd of his classmates like he's untouchable and thinks, *How did this happen?* And then, *How do I fix it?*

Izuku invites Todoroki to sit with them during lunch, but Todoroki rebuffs him. His stare chills Izuku right through. He is still getting used to his friends not knowing who he is, and starting years-old relationships from the beginning again; it hurts to see one of his first friends look at him like he's a bug.

"It's not just his quirk that is cold, no?" Aoyama leans against the counter to Izuku's left. He's swirling juice in a wine glass. Some of it spills over the lip of the glass and stains his white button up. He pinches it between two fingers. "Merde."

"Have you ever considered swearing in English?" Izuku asks.

Aoyama looks up at him. "Pardon?"

"Nothing," Izuku says.

Izuku doesn't know how to get juice stains out of a white shirt, but maybe his classmates do. Uraraka says that Iida carries more fatherly energy than all their upperclassmen put together.

He can't get through to Todoroki, but he's not the only person in their class of twenty. He's not the only friend that Izuku needs to grow close to again.

"Hey, Aoyama," Izuku says, "would you like to eat lunch with us?"

Aoyama lights up. He lets go off his shirt and bounces on his pointed heels, ruined shirt forgotten. "Yes! Yes, I would love to."

Aoyama seems to remember himself. He stops bouncing and coughs into his fist, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "I mean, sure. If you want me there, I suppose it would be impolite to refuse."

Izuku grabs his wrist and tugs him towards the table he shares with his friends. “Come on, then. Maybe we can ask the others about your shirt.”

Aoyama goes shy under Izuku’s touch. His friends seem baffled by Aoyama’s presence, at first, but make him feel welcome anyway.

Floaty Girl, Almost-Ingenium, and Froppy were often seen in each other’s company, but Prince Charming often came alone. Izuku had never seen him with these three heroes. Prince Charming said it was because he preferred to work on his own and soak up the spotlight for himself, and Izuku believed him, but seeing him animatedly talking about hero costumes and listening to Iida’s advice about getting stains out of white clothes, going so far as to talk out his phone to take notes —it settles something in his stomach.

This is right. This is how his friends should be—happy and thriving. Together.

Izuku has been looking for the Operator. He thinks Aizawa knows that, but he hasn’t said anything to stop him or assisted Izuku in his task. Since their conversation a few days after the USJ attack, Aizawa hasn’t said anything else about time travel to Izuku, but sometimes, Izuku will catch Aizawa staring at him from across the classroom or the training field with an unreadable expression.

If the Operator was somewhere on campus, if he had tried out for the hero course like the rest of them, Aizawa might know. It’s possible that All Might knows, too. He was one of the examiners, after all. He might know of a brainwashing quirk. But Izuku doesn’t want to share this with them. He wouldn’t be able to explain to All Might why he needed to know, and there’s something about the way that Aizawa watches him that tells Izuku that this is something he has to do for himself. It’s not Aizawa’s task. It’s his.

Izuku hovers outside of Class 1-B’s room for a few days until Monoma is even more worked up than usual and keeps trying to pick fights with him at lunchtime. Izuku doesn’t recognise any of the Class 1-B students. Disappointing, but not surprising.

He goes home and brainstorms as he lifts weights with one hand. The Operator is the only missing hero. If Kacchan is Grenades, and at this point, Izuku is certain that he is, than every other single hero is accounted for and in the same class. Class 1-A is compromised of Izuku, eighteen baby-faced versions of his childhood friends, and Mineta.

Izuku definitely never met anyone like Mineta when he was younger. If it was someone like Tokoyami that was missing, then Izuku might have thought that they were working from the shadows and never ran into Izuku, but Mineta isn't that kind of a hero. From what Izuku has seen, Mineta isn't any kind of hero at all.

The pieces start slotting together: one missing hero, and one un-herolike student, and one teacher that has expelled hundreds of students in the past.

"Sir," Izuku says to Aizawa the next day during a lull in hero training, "how often do hero classes get new students?"

"Not often," Aizawa says.

"But it can happen?"

"Yes. If there's a space open and the student in question has proven themselves worthy of being transferred into the hero course."

"Transferred," Izuku repeats, nearly vibrating with excitement. His hand itches for a pen. "Transferred from another department?"

Aizawa eyes him with suspicion. It's a familiar look, these days. Aizawa always seems to be waiting for Izuku to do something, though Izuku hasn't worked out what exactly that *something* is.

"If students from General Education prove themselves, they can be transferred into the hero course," Aizawa says.

"General Education," Izuku repeats.

How could he have been so blind? He's watched the sports festival since he was little. He's seen the General Education students scrambling after the hero course, desperate to snatch a few minutes in the spotlight for themselves, and he knows the Operator. He's written pages and pages theorising about his quirk. It works on people. The entrance exam had been full of robots.

The Operator was supposed to be in Class 1-A with the rest of the eighteen other budding heroes, but he wasn't accepted because of his quirk, so he must have settled for the next best option: General Education.

"Thanks, sir!" Izuku says. He spins around, but before he can run off to speed through his training (and then, after the bell, race deeper into campus to find the other departments), Aizawa yanks him back by the hood.

"Don't go meddling with things," Aizawa says. "Remember what I said."

"I remember."

Aizawa scans his face, looking for some hint of a lie, before releasing him. "Problem child. Go practise with the rest of your classmates. And don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Yes, sir."

At lunchtime, Uraraka sighs and slumps into her sleep. Her chin rests on Izuku's shoulder, but she's looking beyond him, at something on the other side of the cafeteria.

Izuku glances over his shoulder. Asui is waiting in the food line with Hagakure. Her hair is done up in twin buns. She's smiling.

"You should tell her," Izuku says.

Uraraka jumps up like she's been burnt and claps her hands to her face. Beneath her splayed fingers, her cheeks flush pink. "What? Tell who? I'm not—I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You should tell Asui that you like her," Izuku says. "I bet she'd return your feelings."

Sorry, sensei, Izuku thinks. *I had to interfere here. Just a little bit. Uraraka is my best friend.*

Uraraka peeks at him through the slats of her fingers. “Why do you think that?”

“Just a hunch,” Izuku says.

In the end, the Operator seeks out their class without being prompted.

“Depending on the results of the sports festival,” he says, bracketed by stone-faced students from other departments, “they’ll consider our transfer into the hero course. And it seems they may also transfer people out.”

Uraraka and Iida gulp beside him, intimidated by that idea, by the ice in the Operator’s eyes, but Izuku has to stop himself from pushing past his classmates and jumping on the Operator in excitement. Something tells him that he’s not here to make friends. Not with anyone in the hero course, anyway.

But the Operator has a plan. He’s coming. He hasn’t given up. Izuku doesn’t know what will happen when all nineteen of his friends are in the one place; he just knows that it needs to happen.

Izuku takes a deep breath and steps forward.

“Um,” he says, trying to ignore the way everyone’s eyes dart to him, “I’m Midoriya Izuku. Pleased to meet you. Let’s be friends.”

Everyone around them splutters. Somewhere to his left, Kaminari calls, “Oi, Midoriya, don’t make friends with the guy that just dropped a declaration of war on us!”

“I’m not going to go easy on you just because you try and play nice,” says the Operator.

Izuku shakes his head. “No, I don’t want you to go easy on us. Try your hardest. Don’t give up until your dreams are realised. But, in the

meanwhile, I'd like for us to be friends. In this class, we're already competitors. When we're heroes, we'll be aiming for the same top spots. We don't go easy on one another, but we're still friends."

Ashido groans. "Midoriya, no fair! You can't keep showing us up with that hero attitude."

"That was so manly," Kirishima says, sniffing. "The true spirit of heroism."

Izuku doesn't look away from the Operator, but he can feel his cheeks redden at their comments. The Operator doesn't look away, either. He's tall. Izuku remembers him being tall, but he had half-expected that to be a product of his child-mind, when every adult seemed to loom over him, but it wasn't. The Operator stands half a head taller than the other students, and he will only grow with age.

"I don't want to hold hands and skip through the flowers with you," he says, at last. "I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to win."

"You can do both," Izuku says.

The Operator scoffs and turns away, but Izuku isn't discouraged. So long as the Operator doesn't give up, so long as he holds tight to his dream and works to be transferred into Class 1-A, then it will all work out. They have almost three years of high school left. Izuku will make friends with them all before he graduates. This, he vows.

Izuku is so rung out by his encounter with the Operator—his encounter with all of them over the weeks they've been at UA—that he sits down next to Kirishima at lunchtime, grabs his wrist, and shoves his hand into his hair.

"Uh," Kirishima says, flexing his fingers against Izuku's scalp. "Are you feeling alright, dude?"

“UA is very stressful,” Izuku says honestly.

Kirishima considers this, then shrugs. “You’re definitely right about that.”

Kirishima threads his fingers obediently through Izuku’s curls, pushing his fringe out of his face again and again. Izuku leans into the touch like a cat. His eyes slip closed.

He feels like Red. He is Red. A big, warm hand, solid and real, that’s so gentle pushing through Izuku’s hair, making him feel safe.

On the other side of the table, Kaminari says, “Is Midoriya okay?”

“I don’t know, man,” Kirishima says, “but I mean, UA is pretty insane. I don’t blame him for getting overwhelmed and nervous.”

“Midoriya has always been kind of weird,” Sero says, “so …”

“Hey,” Kirishima says, “don’t be like that. This kind of thing is what friends are for.”

Friends, Izuku thinks sleepily. Kirishima and the others—both the adult and the teenage version—are his friends.

Izuku tries to wave at the Operator at the starting line of the sports festival, but he turns away from him with a roll of his eyes. Izuku doesn’t have time to worry about that, though. He has to prove to the world, to All Might, to himself, that he deserves to be here.

When the final competition is one-on-one fights and Izuku is pitted against the Operator—Shinsou Hitoshi—it feels like fate. When Todoroki pulls him into a tunnel and pours out his heart, it feels even more so. The pieces are falling into place.

Both boys don’t like him at the moment, but that’s okay. Izuku has a rough idea of how to help them, now. He can work with that.

It’s hard to listen to Shinsou’s words. Izuku knows what it’s like to lag behind everyone else because he doesn’t have the right quirk—or have

a quirk at all—but Shinsou is right; Izuku has been blessed. He's been blessed by other people. All Might, and his mum, and all the kind, brave people in his class. He's been blessed from that first moment ten years ago when he was saved by heroes, when Ice Prince and Floaty Girl—*Todoroki and Uraraka*—pulled him out of danger. Shinsou is counted in that number, even if he doesn't know it yet.

Izuku has to do something to repay him.

"Shinsou!" Izuku calls when the match is over. His throbbing hand is cradled to his chest, and the arena still echoes with the screams of the audience.

Shinsou doesn't pause. He doesn't look at Izuku.

Izuku trails after him. "Shinsou, wait!"

He stops, finally. He glares at Izuku over his shoulder, but there's no real heat in it. He just looks tired. "What do you want? You've already won."

"You can do it," Izuku says. "You can be a hero."

"I don't need pity from the golden child."

Golden child? Izuku draws in a deep breath, and forges on. "No, I mean it. Your quirk—it might not have gotten you into the hero course, but there are loads of pro heroes that wouldn't have been able to pass the entrance exam either, like Earserhead and Midnight, and you can do so much with it. You can halt villains in their tracks. No other hero can do that. You can integrate criminals, get them to reveal their plans. You can free hostages without putting anyone in danger, and you can calm crowds of panicking people, and—"

"Stop." A vein of tension cuts through Shinsou's voice. "I don't need your help. Why are you telling me this?"

"I know you can do it." He knows this better than he could ever say. "I just—I guess I want to see that. I want to see that kind of hero come into being. It'd be awesome to work with that kind of hero. And, uh." Izuku scrubs at the back of his head and accidentally smears blood along his uniform collar. "I meant what I said last week. I want to be friends."

Present Mic is calling for them to clear the field, and up ahead, the General Education students are leaning over the railing, beckoning for

Shinsou to come to them. Izuku's friends are somewhere behind him. He needs to go and visit Recovery Girl so he'll be ready for his upcoming match against Todoroki.

Izuku balls his good hand into a fist, and says, "Shinsou."

Shinsou blows out a breath. "Are all of you hero kids this exhausting?"

"We're a handful, yes, but I've been told that I'm a special case. Plus ultra, right?"

"I don't think that's what the school motto means," Shinsou says.

He turns, just enough for Izuku to see his glare melting into what could be called a smile. He still looks tired, but Izuku remembers the bags under the Operator's eyes, the exhausted twist of his lips, and thinks that it might just be a part of him, the same as All Might's bright smile and Uraraka's perpetual cheer.

Izuku resists the urge to shuffle his feet. "Then … friends?"

Shinsou looks him up and down. "Maybe. I'll see you around, Midoriya."

And then he strides off the field and gets swept up in his celebrating classmates. Izuku bounds off the field. He has to weather a lecture from Recovery Girl about his fingers, and figure out how to break through Todoroki's walls, and then, once the sports festival is over, follow through with his promise of friendship with Shinsou, but he can see the cogs turning. It's happening. It's not sure what it is, but—it's happening.

Mum is crying when Izuku comes home. He had excepted that. He saw her readying the living room before he left for school, stacking tissue boxes and water bottles on the coffee table like a soldier preparing to go to war.

He hadn't expected to see one of his battered hero journals laying open in her lap, though.

“Izuku,” Mum says when he closes the door behind him. “Izuku, I’m so sorry. This is the second time I didn’t believe you.”

“Mum,” Izuku starts.

“It took me a while to realise why all your classmates looked so familiar, but then I went into your room, and—” Mum holds up a page close to the back, where Izuku’s newest notes are—the ones he made at the beginning of semester. “Time travel?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you.”

Inko rounds the couch and pulls him into a hug. Her face is wet. He can feel it through his shirt, and he holds onto her tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Mum says wetly. “All this time you were trying to tell me about these heroes and I thought they were imaginary. Oh, Izuku, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know it sounds ridiculous.”

She’s shaking, just slightly, even as she holds onto him so fiercely that he doesn’t think he could pull away, even with his newfound strength. She must be overwhelmed. Izuku has lived with this for years, and dealt with the realisation for weeks. Mum has only known about it for a day. A few hours.

“You were in so much danger,” Mum says, choked up with tears. “All this time—and these people saved you! They saved you. I have to—I have to thank them. You have to invite them over, so I can thank them for looking after you for so many years.”

“They don’t know,” Izuku says. “They’re sixteen, like me. The heroes I met were adults in their twenties, at least.”

Mum pushes him back, holds him at shoulder-length. “Then when they’re adults, when they know, you invite them over and I’ll throw a dinner party. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Izuku says.

Izuku knows what names some of his classmates will choose before anyone else. Maybe he knew their names before the heroes themselves—the small, child versions of the heroes—had even decided. Asui would have been six when Froppy plucked Izuku out of the floodwaters and introduced herself for the first time. Had she decided on her hero name, then? Had she even known that she wanted to be hero?

But Izuku doesn't know what most of his classmates will choose. Picking hero names is an exciting part of any hero course, but Izuku feels as though he's being introduced to his childhood friends for the second time. Or, maybe, like he's unlearning all the wrong guesses he made as a kid.

The class swells with tension when Midnight calls for them to present their names, until Aoyama flounces up to the teachers desk and pronounces, "Shining Hero: I cannot stop twinkling!"

Izuku blinks. The rest of the class muffles their snickers behind their hands.

He's not being introduced to his hero friends for the second time, he realises. These are still his classmates. His friends. His fellow fifteen year old students who don't know the first thing about choosing hero names. The names picked today may not be the names they use ten years from now.

Ashido is next. "Alien Queen!"

Midnight shoots her down, and she goes back to her seat, dragging her heels. Izuku chokes down a hysterical burst of laughter and tries to school his face into something he hopes his neutral. From the concerned look Sero shoots him, he hasn't managed it.

"It's a good name," Ashido mumbles under her breath, and Izuku knows she will still be sour about it ten years in the future.

Kirishima becomes "Red Riot." Izuku is busy berating himself for how close he got to guessing the correct name—one word off!—and so he almost misses Kacchan smacking a hand on the desk in front of him. "*Huh?* What the fuck kind of name is that?"

The smile slips off Kirishima's face. "You don't like it, Bakugou?"

"What about Rocky?" Kacchan says.

“Such a cutesy name from Bakugou?” Kaminari asks. “Didn’t know you had it in you, dude.”

“Rocky is a good name if you’re trying to appeal to young kids,” Midnight says, “or Americans. But Red Riot is a great name, too, especially if you’re going to continue the colour theme you currently have with your hair and costume.”

“Rocky is super manly,” Kirishima agrees, “but I’m always wanted to pay homage to Crimson Riot, you know? He’s the person that inspired me to be a hero in the first place. Sorry, bro.”

Kacchan slouches down in his seat and mumbles something about Rocky being logical rather than cute, and being a great name for a hardening hero, and how none of them know anything.

Izuku scribbles down each name as they’re presented. Cellophane, and Tailman, and Pinky, and Charge Bolt, and Anima. He’ll add them to his journal tonight. He no longer has to refer to his friends as the made-up names he made when he was a child. He has real names.

He managed to guess Invisible Girl right. He still thinks Black Raven and Shift Hands are better hero names than Tsukuyomi and Tentacole, though. Maybe he can subtly suggest them to Tokoyami and Shoji during lunch. Yellow Might can finally be crossed out and replaced with Sugarman.

Kacchan is still struggling with a name, which makes Izuku feel better about being stuck, too. Uraraka’s name is perfect. After she smiles shyly and introduces herself as Uravity, Izuku’s not sure how he referred to her as Floaty Girl for ten years. It doesn’t fit her. Uravity is perfect.

Todoroki names himself *Shouto*. Izuku imagines suggesting that Todoroki take up the name *Ice Prince,* imagines just saying the words Ice Prince out loud, to Todoroki’s face, and ducks his head to hide his blush.

Iida’s whiteboard says *Tenya*. Izuku doesn’t know how to help him. He wishes he did. He wishes he had a name to suggest, but now Almost-Ingenium seems sour and offensive after what has happened to Iida’s brother.

And then it’s his turn, and he becomes Deku—a choice he makes himself, this time. A murmur spreads through the class like ripples across a still pond, but Izuku stays firm. This is his name. This is the

kind of hero he will become.

Kacchan looks up from where he was furiously scribbling hero names onto his whiteboard. Izuku had half-expected him to fly across the room and smack the board out of his hand, but he doesn't. Kacchan remains in his seat. His face is oddly still.

When Izuku sits back down, Kacchan glances at him over his shoulder. Izuku lays his whiteboard flat on his desk, and makes himself stay there, rather than shrinking away.

"Deku?" Kacchan doesn't say the word like it's an insult, the way he has said it for ten years. He says it like he's trying it out, testing the way it feels in his mouth.

"Yeah," Izuku says. "Deku."

"Deku," Kacchan says once more, and then scoffs, a barely audible noise even to Izuku, and turns back around to keep brainstorming on his whiteboard.

Todoroki starts sitting with them at lunch. Izuku has to stop himself from staring, even more than he had before, when he was still trying to piece together why his class was full of childhood friends.

A week after the sports festivals, Izuku wets his lips, and says, "Have you ever thought about growing your hair out, Todoroki?"

Todoroki lowers his chopsticks. "No, I haven't. What if it gets in my face?"

"You could tie it back," Izuku says. His face feels hot. His cheeks must be bright pink. "You could braid it, or put it in a ponytail or a bun. It would look nice. I mean—your hair is so unusual, so of course—not unusual, that sounds mean, more like, uh, unique? Yes, unique. Growing it long would look really—really good!"

Izuku wants to cram the words back into his mouth. He wants to work

out how his classmates managed to time travel so he can go back a few minutes and choke himself out.

Todoroki touches his fringe. “It’s something to think about, I suppose.”

“I think you’d look great,” Uraraka says. “Very handsome!”

“Midoriya is right,” Iida says. “With such an interesting two-toned colour, it would look very striking grown out. It might increase your marketability as a pro hero. We aren’t just our costumes, after all—our image is composed of our body language, and word choice, and even our hairstyles.”

“Hm. That’s a good point.”

“So—so you will?” Izuku asks.

“Maybe,” Todoroki says.

Izuku nods and stuffs his mouth with his lunch so he won’t have to reply verbally. Under the table, Uraraka kicks him. She’s smirking at him. It’s a knowing smirk. It makes Izuku sweat more than he already is.

“*Don’t,*” Izuku tells her.

Uraraka raises her hands defensively. “I didn’t say anything.”

Izuku had thought the days of his hero friends swooping in to save him, the way they had been saving him since he was little, were over, but he was wrong. They were still there to save him, but now, they weren’t grown pro heroes who navigated fights easily. They were his friends. And this time, Izuku can fight by their side.

After Stain, Iida accepts the name “Ingenium.” Kacchan and Todoroki are still undecided on their names, but that’s okay. They’ll get there.

He sees Shinsou at lunch and on his way to class. He lets Izuku sit with him every now and then, but he doesn’t fully trust Izuku. Not yet.

“I don’t feel like your equal,” Shinsou says from the other side of the table, sitting stiffly between Asui and Uraraka. They’re both doing their best to make him feel welcome, but they’re here because Izuku has asked them to be, and Shinsou knows that.

Uraraka puts down her chopsticks, and says, “Sometimes it feels as though my classmates are too far ahead of me and that might create feelings of inequality if I thought too hard about it, but I’m choosing instead to let it inspire me to do better.”

Uraraka glances at Izuku when she says this. Asui says, “Yes, I know what you mean. Ribbit.”

“What?” Izuku says. They ignore him.

“It’s not the same,” Shinsou says. “You’re in the same class. The same course. I’m not even at the starting line yet.”

“That’s not true—” Izuku tries.

“Then when you’re at the starting line,” Uraraka says, picking her chopsticks back up and twirling them the way he’s seen her twirl a bo-staff on the rare days Aizawa lets them try out non-lethal weapons from the support course, “when you’re transferred into our class, we should spar. If you’re behind us, you should use it as motivation to catch up, right?”

Uraraka said when. Not if. When.

Shinsou doesn’t miss that, either. Some of the tension leeches out of his shoulders. “Alright. But I won’t go easy on you.”

Uraraka smiles, a frightening kind of smile that she’s aimed at Izuku a dozen different times during hero training, and says, “I won’t go easy on you, either.”

Kacchan swings between hot and cold without warning. When they were younger, he would antagonise Izuku almost daily, only to ignore him for long stretches of time for no discernible reason. Ignoring Izuku after the run-in with the slime villain made sense, but the rest of

it—the way he would blow up at seemingly innocent things, only to go silent the next day; the way he gravitated towards some of their classmates like he was starving for touch, after years of sneering at the concept of friendship; the way he sometimes stared at Izuku as though he was trying to look straight through him—didn't make sense.

Today, Kacchan is running hot. He had targeted Izuku during hero training, and seemed to take vicious pleasure in scorching his suit until it was more black than green. Their classmates edged away from them, like they were too bombs destined to set each other off. After class, an argument begins in the locker room, and spills out into the halls, until they were striding off to find somewhere they could yell at one another without a teacher giving them detention.

Iida shouts after him to not give into Kacchan's antagonism, but Izuku dodges around him and follows Kacchan deeper into the school.

Izuku is not the same quirkless kid that flinched under Kacchan's stare, and Kacchan's not the same person that burnt holes in his elementary school uniform, even if it sometimes feels like he is. They both have a long way to go, and they'll get nowhere if they keep avoiding one another. His childhood friends taught him that—maybe not in words, but in the way they avoided his questions and turned to leave him after every attack, only ever staying, only ever revealing something about themselves, after Izuku chased after them.

The other classes are getting out for lunch. They dodge around the Generation Education students and head round the back of the buildings, towards the empty space behind one of the gymnasiums.

As soon as they get there, Kacchan throws Izuku up against one of the walls. Izuku's hand wraps around his wrist. He won't let himself be burnt. Not this time.

"Who the fuck are you?" Kacchan asks, almost desperate beneath the razor-wire anger.

"Kacchan," Izuku begins, clenching his teeth, "I know you don't like me, but—"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Shinsou has a bundle of textbooks under one arm. He should be heading to lunch and squeezing in extra study between bites, not standing here, glaring at Kacchan like he's working out how to take him apart.

Uraraka peers out from behind him. She seems almost sheepish, half-hidden behind him, but the second her gaze lands on Kacchan, holding Izuku up against the wall, all the timidness drains out of her. She straightens, face like stone, and she's a future hero again, not a sixteen year old girl.

"Put him down," she says.

"Get the fuck out of here," Kacchan tells Uraraka, not looking at Shinsou. So he does know who Shinsou is, then. "This is between me and Deku—you extras can fuck right off."

"Is that so?" Shinsou asks.

Kacchan still ignores him. "You fucking follow us, round face?"

"Yeah," she says. "Shinsou saw me and asked what was wrong. I must have looked worried. Not sure why, though. It's not like I was worried my best friend was going to get hurt by the biggest bully at UA."

"Uraraka," Izuku tries.

"I'm not going to—" Kacchan cuts himself off. He pushes away from Izuku and shoves his hands into his pockets. A peace offering. "We were gonna have a conversation. Like adults. Now fuck off."

Izuku isn't sure he's ever had a mature, level-headed conversation with Kacchan before. Shinsou and Uraraka seem to share his doubt. They both look like they're ready to jump into a fight with Kacchan, one of the most powerful students in their grade, if he attempts to hurt Izuku. It's a heady thought. No one has ever intervened before.

But even steeled for a fight, ready to defend Izuku, they don't look like the Operator or Floaty Girl. They're dressed in their school uniforms. Uraraka's hair is damp from the showers and her tie is lopsided, like she dressed in a hurry. Shinsou has his books. They're not in their hero costumes—Shinsou doesn't even have a hero costume yet—and they're not stronger than their opponent. They're not twenty-something years old. They're young, and inexperienced, and burning up with anger on Izuku's behalf.

Like this, they may not Izuku's childhood heroes, but they're still his friends.

Friends he can keep. Friends who won't disappear.

“I’m not doing this with you here,” Kacchan says.

“Good,” Shinsou says. “Let’s all go back. We’re missing lunch.”

Kacchan opens his mouth to argue, but a *bang* echoes from the other side of the gymnasium. Izuku has sparred enough times to know what it sounds like when someone is thrown into UA’s reinforced walls.

Someone flings out swearwords and then the *bang* comes again, louder this time. Izuku is sprinting around the gymnasium before he can think to tell someone to run for a teacher.

It’s been so long that he thinks it’s his classmates, at first. The costumes are similar, but their builds are wrong—too tall and broad and muscled to belong to a teenager. He doesn’t recognise the villain, but he recognises Earphone slumped below a dented wall, spitting blood and expletives into the dirt, and Red on top of the villain, handcuffing him with practised ease, below a second, even larger dent.

His friends round the corner after him. Uraraka and Shinsou freeze. Uraraka makes a choked noise in the back of her throat, and Shinsou says, “What the actual fuck?”

Kacchan surveys the scene and then says, “Thought you two had up and died.”

Earphone and Red look up—Earphone Jack and Red Riot, Izuku corrects. He knows their hero names, now. He knows their real names, too. He knows what they look like first thing in the morning, trudging down the dorm stairs with bed-head, shoving toast into their mouths before class.

He had gotten the first past of their hero names right, Izuku supposes. He’d had half the puzzle pieces. Now, he has the full picture. An *almost* full picture, anyway.

“Shit,” Earphone Jack says.

“Uh,” Red Riot says, “hey, guys. How are you?”

“How are you?” Earphone Jack repeats. “Really? That’s what you’re going with?”

“What else am I supposed to say?” Red Riot asks.

Earphone Jack considers this. She stands up, ignoring the blood dripping from one corner of her mouth, and waves her hand in the air. “These are not the droids you are looking for.”

“Wow,” Kacchan says flatly.

“I didn’t know you liked old-school pop culture,” Izuku says.

Earphone Jack shrugs and fiddles with one of her ears. “My girlfriend is secretly a big nerd and got me into them.”

“Um.” Uraraka’s voice climbs in pitch with every word. “Can someone —can someone please explain what’s going on?”

Earphone Jack squeezes her eyes shut and rubs at her temple. “Red, you do it.”

Red Riot climbs off the bound villain and dusts dirt off his suit pants. He glances at the teenagers and opens his mouth. Closes it. Thinks for a moment.

“You’re having a dream,” Red Riot finally says. “A joint dream. Together. None of this is real.”

Shinsou crosses his arms. “Nice try, but no.”

“You’re hallucinating?” Red Riot tries.

“No,” Shinsou says.

Red Riot pauses again. He’s thinking so hard that his face scrunches up. Then he clicks his fingers and points at them. “We were hit by a weird quirk that aged us up! Yeah. That’s it. We’re your regular classmates that were changed by a quirk.”

“For some reason, I don’t believe you,” Shinsou says.

“It’s time travel,” Kacchan says. His voice is level. Unbothered. Izuku thinks he must look like Uraraka—staring at Kacchan, mouth open—because Kacchan looks at them and scowls. “What’s with the dumb faces?”

Izuku pushes past Shinsou and Uraraka—still staring at Earphone Jack and Red Riot and Kacchan, and trying to make sense of it all—and shoves Kacchan up against the wall. Kacchan’s hands go around his wrist. He doesn’t push Izuku away. Faint explosives detonate in his palms, enough to tingle, but not enough to hurt. A warning.

“You knew,” Izuku says through his teeth, hands buried in Kacchan’s uniform shirt. “All these years and you *knew*.”

“Get the fuck off me, Deku,” Kacchan says. “I didn’t know the whole time, alright?”

“But for years, for at least a few years, you’ve known about my friends. You were—god.” Izuku drops Kacchan and backs up a few steps. “You met them, too.”

Kacchan shoves his shirt down to smooth out the wrinkles Izuku’s hands have left. He doesn’t look at Izuku when he says, “Yeah. I did.”

Izuku tries to grab him again, but Red Riot grabs him around the waist and hoists him into the air.

“Slow down there, little dude,” Red Riot says. “Don’t go starting a fight right now. I’ll put you in time-out if I have to.”

Izuku tries to squirm out of Red Riot’s hold, but he’s an adult—an experienced pro hero—and he holds him tight.

Earphone Jack sighs. “Why do you have to be so fucking high-maintenance, Midoriya?”

“Me?” Izuku says. “What about Kacchan? Since apparently you knew him as a kid, too.”

Kacchan bears his teeth at him. It’s a strangely calm action for him. If Izuku were trying to attack him in a classroom setting, Kacchan would be fighting back. In the presence of their adult classmates, Kacchan seems subdued, almost. Tempered.

“Do you promise to behave?” Red Riot asks. Izuku would say that he sounds like a teacher, but if Izuku were trying to pick a fight with Kacchan in front of Aizawa, then Aizawa would probably string him up by his toes, not hold him in this gentle grip and talk to him so softly.

Izuku sags in Red Riot’s hold. “Fine. I promise.”

Red Riot sets him down on the ground and then, like he can’t stop himself, he ruffles Izuku’s hair.

Uraraka seems to have gotten over her shock. She bounces around Earphone Jack and Red Riot. Shinsou watches on, even as he hangs

back. He's less energetic than Uraraka, but his gaze is sharp, taking in every detail about the future heroes.

"Are we still friends in the future?" Uraraka demands. "Do we all become pro heroes? Where are you on the hero ranks? Where am I? Is anyone in the Top 10?"

Red Riot laughs. "You're almost as bad as Katsuki was."

Uraraka glances at Kacchan. He shoves his hands in his pocket. "What? Random heroes kept appearing out of thin air and saving me but wouldn't tell me their names, and you think I wasn't going to have a shit-tonne of questions?"

"Wait," Izuku says, "who was worse? Me or Kacchan?"

He can't believe that he's asking this. He can't believe that his childhood friends don't just belong to him; this whole time, they've belonged to Kacchan, too.

"Katsuki," Red Riot says.

Earphone Jack screws up her face, like the memory of their younger selves is painful. "Yes, but Midoriya was more of a nuisance. Bakugou kept trying to tackle us and scream questions at us, but Midoriya would run at the *villains*. It's hard to look after an inexperienced preteen when they're waving a red flag at villains."

All eyes jump to Izuku.

"Um," Izuku says.

"I never did that," Kacchan says, and he glances at Red Riot as though expecting to be praised for not hurling himself at villains when he was a child.

Red Riot smiles. "I know, buddy. Good work."

Izuku manages to catch Shinsou's eye. His eyebrows are raised, as if to say, *Are you seeing this?*

Izuku shrugs back, just as bewildered.

"This explains so much," Uraraka says. "Deku, you were so jumpy during the first few weeks of term. I thought you were nervous about entering UA, because I was nervous, too, but then we started hero training and I realised you were even *more* nervous around the

students than you were actually fighting or talking to the teachers, and I thought maybe it was social anxiety, but you were still just so …"

"Odd?" Shinsou volunteers.

"He was acting like a fucking freak," Kacchan says. Earphone Jack cuffs him around the ear, and he bares his teeth at her, but doesn't retaliate or even curse her out.

"You were a little strange," Uraraka tells Izuku, apologetic. "I thought it was just your personality for a while, too. I would never have thought it was because you were recognising some of our classmates who had time travelled and met you as a kid."

"Wait." Shinsou drops his books and they land in the dirt with a loud thud, kicking up dust. He grabs Izuku by the shoulders. "The first time we met you tried to make friends with me, even though I was declaring war on the hero course. That was because it wasn't the first time we had met, wasn't it?"

"Um," Izuku says.

"Oh, my god." Shinsou releases Izuku and steps away. He shoves his fingers through his hair. It sticks up under the stressed grip of his fingers. "Oh, my god. I thought you were aggressively nice or just stupid, but you *recognised* me. I time travelled, too. Which means—"

Shinsou goes quiet. He rubs a hand over his mouth, like he's scared the words will escape without his consent.

Uraraka looks from Shinsou, to Izuku, to the grown-up versions of their friends with wide eyes. "Did I—did I also—?"

"We really fucked this up," Earphone Jack says.

"Iida is going to lecture us for hours," Red Riot agrees.

"I time travelled?" Uraraka chokes out. She whirls on Izuku and he instinctively steps away from the feral look in her eyes. "Deku, did you recognise me at the entrance exam?"

"Well," Izuku begins, and then stops. He has no idea what to say. Aizawa talked about maintaining the timeline, but now Shinsou and Uraraka know that there are time travellers in their class. That isn't Izuku's fault, technically.

Uraraka whirls on Kacchan. He shrugs at her. “I don’t know shit, round face. I never met you as a kid.”

Uraraka turns back to Izuku. “Deku.”

Her hands twitch by her side. He has a vision of himself floating up into the air and over the gymnasium, and never coming down again.

Izuku swallows. “You, uh. You might have time travelled. Yes. You both did.”

Shinsou sits down, right there in the dirt, next to his pile of textbooks. He’s gone white as a sheet. “I’m a hero,” he says.

Kacchan rolls his eyes. “You’re not a hero yet, jackass. You’re sixteen.”

“But I am, in the future.” Shinsou looks to Izuku for confirmation. “If I travelled back in time, I would have done so as a hero. You know me. You’ve met me, when I was a hero.”

“Iida isn’t going to lecture us,” Earphone Jack says to Red Riot. “He’s going to fucking murder us.”

Red Riot makes a face, like he’s already imagining what his murder at the hands of an adult Iida will feel like, and nods. “Probably.”

Shinsou stares up at Izuku from his place in the dirt. This is more painful than their match at the sports festival had been, when Izuku’s childhood friend had spat insults at him. It hurts more then when the Operator had hugged him goodbye after buying him bubble tea and then turned a corner and disappeared, as though he were never there in the first place. Because Izuku has been there. He has sat on the ground like this, staring up at All Might, so desperate to be told that he could be a hero that he felt as though he was going to implode.

“Yes,” Izuku says. “I met you when I was ten. You were an adult, a hero, and you saved my life.”

Shinsou puts a hand over his mouth, like he’s trying to stop himself from throwing up, and Kacchan whirls on Izuku.

“You can’t go giving out that kind of information,” Kacchan snaps. “Time travel is fucking delicate.”

He reaches out to grab Izuku, but before he can touch him, Aizawa’s capture weapon encircles his wrist and tugs him back. Everyone tenses

up, even Earphone Jack and Red Riot.

“Lunch has ended,” Aizawa says, eyes burning red. All Might hovers behind him, mouth hanging open, but no sound coming out. “Why aren’t you all in class?”

“We got sidetracked?” Uraraka offers.

Aizawa looks over their heads at the adult version of his students. “Kirishima,” he says. “Jirou.”

“Hello again, sir,” Red Riot says. Earphone Jack gives a small wave.

“You have all been careless,” Aizawa tells the adults. “Bakugou is right; time travel isn’t something to be used indiscreetly.”

“Time travel?” All Might says. “Is that really—”

“Yes,” Aizawa cuts in. He releases Bakugou, and glares at them. “It’s time for a talk.”

Red Riot and Earphone Jack make to follow Aizawa, and he holds up a hand to stop them. He doesn’t say anything. He stares at them, flat and exhausted all at once, and they step back.

“Right,” Red Riot says. “Time travellers probably shouldn’t be seen walking around campus. We’ll just, uh. We’ll go.”

“I would scold you for not wearing disguises, voice modulators, or even masks when time travelling and talking to people from the past, but at this point, the damage has been done. You are lucky that there are people who clean up after negligent time travellers.”

Red Riot’s shoulders slump, and Earphone Jack winces. Apparently, Aizawa’s scolding will never stop being effective, even when his students have grown up.

Kacchan bristles and opens his mouth like he’s going to defend their friends, but Izuku interrupts him, “There are? Who?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Aizawa says. “Time travel is a sensitive and often classified subject. And no, you can’t talk to the agents who deal with time travellers. I doubt my old contacts even work.”

“Old contacts?” Izuku’s thoughts jump to their conversation a few days after the USJ attack, when Aizawa had pulled him aside, exhausted but unsurprised by the idea of a class full of time travellers.

Izuku figures it out a moment before Shinsou blurts out, “You’re a time traveller.”

They turn to look at Shinsou. He’s no longer sat on the dirt, looking as if the world was rearranging itself around him, but his hair is messier than usual and his slacks are coated with a thin layer of dirt. By his side, Uraraka looks as though she’s hyped up on too much caffeine, jittery and dangerously over-energised.

Izuku had eleven years to adjust to the mysterious heroes who continually dropped in on him, and then months to come to terms with his classmates being time travellers. Uraraka and Shinsou have only known for about an hour.

“How did you figure it out?” Aizawa asks.

“Don’t fucking tell me you met time travellers as kid, too,” Kacchan says to Shinsou.

Shinsou shakes his head, no. “You’re calm, sir. You’re normally calm, but when it comes to something that might endanger your students, you’re usually more alert than this. You didn’t question if something had happened to Kirishima or Jirou—like an age accelerating quirk or shape shifters. You knew it was time travel immediately. You knew they were here to help. You knew it wasn’t something to be concerned about.”

“Perceptive,” Aizawa says.

“When?” Kacchan demands. “When did you time travel?”

“It wasn’t for either of you,” Aizawa says. “There was a high-risk mission a few years ago. The few heroes in the know were clamouring for a chance to go back, but none of them were discreet. I volunteered. This person’s life was vitally important to the timeline, and at the time, I had thought our lives were different enough that we wouldn’t meet.” Aizawa turns and heads to the building full of classrooms before they can question him any further.

All Might stands in the shade of the gymnasium, blinking at Aizawa’s retreating form.

“Had thought?” All Might echoes. “Wait. *Wait.* Aizawa, come back!”

Aizawa marches them up to an empty classroom. They sit in the front row while Aizawa perches against the teacher's desk. Even All Might folds himself into a too small chair, staring up at Aizawa like he's never seen him before.

"I've already explained this to Midoriya and Bakugou," Aizawa says, ignoring the way Izuku spins in his seat to stare at Kacchan, "but the two of you can always do with a reminder, so I will say again: you cannot talk about time travel with anyone who doesn't already know. You shouldn't talk about it at all if you're in danger of being overheard.

"Time travel is tricky. There is a reason why time-related quirks are kept quiet. If just one villain successfully travelled back without being stopped, they could change the course of history. Time travel is kept from public knowledge so that no one else is tempted to meddle with the timeline."

Izuku raises his hand in the air, even though this isn't a class. Aizawa just looks at him, so Izuku lowers it, and says, "You mentioned agents."

"Time travellers can be sloppy," Aizawa says, and for some reason, he's glaring at his four students as he says this. "Midoirya, Bakugou, you had heroes and villains travelling into your neighbourhood for years. Do you think the public wouldn't notice something was amiss? There are people that clean up after your messes."

Izuku picks at the graffiti etched into the side of the desk. He's missing class, he realises belatedly. It feels like such a small thing in the wake of all that has happened today.

It feels strange, too, to know that the people on either side of them are dealing with their own revelations. He grew used to dealing with this on his own for over a decade, and now, Shinsou and Uraraka are almost bouncing in their seats, and Kacchan is slouched in his chair, unbothered by the lecture Aizawa is giving on the dangers of time

travel. All Might is at the end of the row, his body leaning to one side, too tall to properly sit in a teenage-sized desk. His eyes are fixed to Aizawa's face. Aizawa is not looking at All Might.

Aizawa talks to them in that no-nonsense, even tone and answers any questions they may have. He doesn't scold Shinsou when he asks the same question twice, just repeats the answer a second time. He doesn't remind Izuku to pay attention when he stares out the window, staring at nothing, like he might do if Izuku zoned out in class.

Eventually, Aizawa pushes away from the desk, and says, "That's enough. Go back to your dorms. Keep your mouths shut and if you have any questions or problems, you know where to find me."

The students scramble out of their seats and head to the door. Kacchan is the first one to leave, almost jogging out into the hall, but Izuku lags back. All Might is still sitting in that too-small desk.

All Might spreads his hands over the wood. His hands are so big that his spread fingers span the full width of the desk.

"Aizawa," All Might says. "Can we talk?"

Aizawa sighs. "Yes, I suppose we have to."

Izuku slips silently out of the classroom after his friends. He doesn't wait in the hallway for All Might. The two men have decades-old secrets to unravel. It could take a while.

Izuku has his own conversation to have, anyway.

When they return to the dorms, their classmates stare at them. Jirou and Kirishima are there, too. Uraraka stares at them. She's pink in the face and looks like she's going to burst. Izuku barely blinks at them. Kacchan seems unconcerned, too. Months of staring into the teenage faces of his childhood friends makes you immune to this kind of thing.

Kirishima is pulling the lid off the blender and pouring the smoothy

into cups. When Kacchan slides up to him, mouth pursed into a line, Kirishima hands him a glass.

“Hey, man,” Kirishima says. “Where were you guys? You missed lunch and all the afternoon classes.”

“Nowhere,” Uraraka squeaks.

“Deku and I got into a fight,” Kacchan says. “Uraraka got dragged into it. We were getting bitched out by the teachers.”

“You don’t seem injured,” Kaminari says.

“It wasn’t that kind of a fight,” Izuku says. Kacchan grunts as if agreeing, and that seems to satisfy their curious classmates.

Jirou looks up from her phone and squints at Uraraka. “What’s with that expression?”

“What expression?” Uraraka says, too loud and high-pitched to be anything other than suspicious.

Kacchan snorts and heads for the stairs. Izuku hangs back for a few minutes, if only to make sure Uraraka is holding up okay, and isn't going to immediately blurt out the real reason they were missing from class.

She’s still pink, and visibly nervous, but doesn’t seem like she’s going to start shouting about time travel. Izuku excuses himself and heads upstairs. He collects his hero journal—the old, battered copy he started when he was five—and then heads back out again.

He raps his knuckles on the closed dorm room. “Kacchan?”

“Fuck off,” Kacchan calls from within.

“Open the door, Kacchan.”

“I said fuck off!”

Izuku tries to open the door, but it’s locked. He sighs. “One last chance.”

“Are you fucking deaf? I said—”

Izuku yanks the doorknob sharply to the left. The lock snaps. He pulls the doorknob towards the ground and, with a final crunch, it falls into

two pieces.

Izuku pushes the door open. Kacchan is pushed against the far side of his bed, arms crossed over his chest. He doesn't look surprised to see Izuku break into his room.

Izuku knocks on the door. "Can I come in?"

This finally sets Kacchan off. He shoves up from the bed and paces like a wild animal confined to a cell. "You just barged right in, don't fucking ask that as if—"

Izuku takes a seat on the edge of the bed, journal tucked in his lap. He's not sure what he's feeling. He hasn't been sure all day.

Kacchan stops pacing. His eyes flick down to the journal. "What do you want?"

"You saw them." Izuku stands up and pushes the journal into Kacchan's hands. "You were rescued by our friends too, right, Kacchan?"

Reluctantly, Kacchan flips open the journal. This isn't the first time Kacchan has seen these drawings. He's seen Izuku sketching his friends in class, or lugging around his journal to and from class, or, when they were very young, babbling to the teacher about the heroes that saved him.

"You saw them," Izuku says again. "You used to make fun of me for having 'imaginary friends' but you met them, too."

"Not all of them," Kacchan says. He sounds tired. It's been an exhausting day for them both. "I did think they were imaginary friends at first. Sounds like something you'd do. But then I saw your drawing of Rocky, and—"

"Rocky?" Izuku says.

Kacchan glowers at him. "They wouldn't tell me their names, okay? I had to come up with something to call them."

Kacchan gave them names, too. All these years, Kacchan has been turning the same mystery over in his head. All this time, and Izuku has had no idea.

Izuku expects Kacchan to fight him through this entire conversation,

but Kacchan flicks through the journal carefully, and says, “How many did you meet in total?”

“Nineteen,” Izuku says.

“Nineteen,” Kacchan says. “Are you bullshitting me right now?”

“No?”

Kacchan flicks back through the journal, his lip upturned. He settles on a page near the beginning. Alien Queen, Electro, and Tape-Man are cramped together over a two-page spread. Izuku drew Alien Queen holding up a peace sign. It seemed in-character for her. Kacchan’s thumb grazes over Electro's smile.

“What did they tell you?” Izuku asks. Did Kacchan know that his childhood friends were future classmates before Izuku did? Were they as secretive with him as they were with Izuku?

“They told me to stop acting like such a little—” Kacchan looks at Izuku and then away, his lips pursed like he’s sucked on a lemon. “Whatever. You’re missing one, anyway.”

“No, I’m not,” Izuku says. “I record every hero I run into.”

“You’re missing the hero with the mask and weird bunny ears. The strongest one.”

Izuku doesn’t remember a hero like that. How has Kacchan met a hero that he doesn’t know?

Something floods Izuku’s throat. It tastes like bile and bursts behind his eyes like firewords—a realisation. It burns.

Izuku swallows down the hot feeling. “You mean …”

Kacchan scoffs, turning away so he doesn’t have to meet Izuku’s eyes. He keeps flicking through the journal until he finds Kirishima.

“I met Kirishima and his still shitty hair,” Kacchan says, “and Jirou and her still shitty attitude, and the three other shitty losers—Kaminari, Ashido, and Sero. And—”

Kacchan has remembered four of their classmates names, something he has never done before. That’s the least important part of what Kacchan just said, but it sticks in Izuku’s head, nonetheless.

“You didn’t meet everyone, then? Just, uh, the five of them?”

“Can you fucking count?” Kacchan glowers at something over Izuku’s head, rather than look Izuku in the eye. “I met six heroes. The five chuckleheads and …”

Izuku waits for Kacchan to finish his sentence. He doesn’t. Izuku isn’t used to this walled up Kacchan. The Kacchan he knows either blasts him back or shouts out his feelings until his throat is torn up.. He doesn’t look get this look on his face—this strange, pinched look—and choke out each sentence, like every word is wrenched painfully from somewhere in his chest. He doesn’t blush pink.

“And?” Izuku prompts.

“And,” Kacchan spits, scrubbing at his cheeks, “you.”

Izuku’s thoughts stutter to a halt.

“You were taller, and your hair and face were hidden by a mask, and you tried not to speak too much. Guess you thought it’d give you away immediately if you blabbed on and on.” Kacchan runs a hand through his hair. He’s still not looking directly at Izuku. “But there was always something about that hero that I couldn’t put my finger on. Until we came here. As soon as I saw that ugly fucking suit you chose as your costume, I knew.”

Months ago, while Izuku’s mind was unravelling at the sight of their entire class decked out in familiar costume, Kacchan was watching him, looking over his suit, and having a similar revelation. Izuku hadn’t even noticed.

“I saw you, too,” Izuku says. “You were wearing a bike helmet, but the grenades, the colouring—it was your hero suit. I should have known when I saw the hero use explosions, or when he took on a group of villains without breaking a sweat or flinching or even hesitating, like he knew there was no doubt that he was going to win, but … it still took years to figure it all out.”

Izuku feels a little stupid, now. He’d spent years trying to solve this mystery, when all this time, one of his childhood heroes had been living across the street from him.

“Me? You saw—” Kacchan’s hand clenches and unclenches at his side.

“You were with Red—uh, I mean, with Kirishima. You seemed close.

Very close."

"You were by yourself," Kacchan says.

Izuku fiddles with the hem of his shirt. "I didn't have any friends with me?"

Kacchan sneers at him. "Sometimes, sure, but the green hero didn't *need* anyone else to win. That was the way it was. He was stronger than the others, and he could win against anyone else he came across, and he could do it all without dropping that dumb smile. Like All Might."

There's a knot in Izuku's throat. "I thought you said you couldn't see his face."

"I could see the edges of it through the mask, and I could *hear* it when he spoke. Fuck. I should've figured it out sooner. He sounded nervous, even after taking down half a dozen villains on his own, but he was still so fucking *chipper*."

Izuku knows Kacchan. He knows that he admires All Might like Izuku. He knows he's a diehard hero fan, even if he never enjoyed conventions and fan forums like Izuku. And he knows what Kacchan sounds like when he talks about someone he respects.

Kacchan respects the green hero that saved him—the hero that Izuku will become.

"The green hero wasn't alone because he *had* to be," Kacchan continues. "He was determined. He was so fucking stubborn. And he never lost."

Silence fills the room. Kacchan glowers down at the journal in his hand. Izuku thinks Kacchan will destroy it, the way he destroyed more than one of Izuku's journals full of hero analysis, but Kacchan throws the journal back at him. Izuku fumbles to catch it. He almost doesn't hear Kacchan when he says, "I have one, too."

Izuku stares down at the journal, open to a drawing Izuku did when he was eight years old. Iida's boxy face stares up at him.

"You have a journal, too?" Izuku says. "Of us? You drew us? Can I see __"

Kacchan's patience is gone. He throws himself onto his chair, skidding

back until he bumps against his desk, and glares up at Izuku.

“Get out of my room unless you want to leave in pieces.”

Izuku has already gotten more than he was ever expecting from this conversation. He spills on his heel, dodging a broken half of the doorknob.

Before he can slip out of the door, Kacchan says, “Deku.” Izuku peeks at him over his shoulder. Kacchan’s stare bores into him. “You better make sure that I meet Persevere again. Don’t fuck up.”

Persevere.

Izuku squints at him. “You named Kirishima Rocky, but I got a name as cool as Persevere? Kacchan, I’m flattered.”

Kacchan hurls a pillow at him. Izuku blocks it with his arm.

“This is why I didn’t fucking tell you,” Kacchan says.

“You must have been older when we first met, if you gave me a name like Persevere.” Kacchan wrenches his gaze away from him. Izuku can’t help the smirk that grows on his lips. “Unless we did meet when you were little, and you called me *something else—”*

Kacchan throws another pillow at him. It hits Izuku in the stomach. A laugh bubbles up Izuku’s throat.

He can name the feeling that sits in his chest, now: relief. A great weight has been taken off his shoulders. This isn’t just Izuku’s secret anymore. It never was, really.

“We’re going to meet our friends again,” Izuku says. “We’ve already met them again, technically, and this time, we don’t have to let them go.”

“Fucking mushy,” Kacchan grumbles.

“Anytime you need to talk—” Izuku says.

“Get out of my room.”

“—you know where to find me. See you in class, Kacchan.”

Izuku tips one last smile at Kacchan and slips out of his room. In the stairwell, he can hear Uraraka’s nervous laughter float up the stairs.

She sounds vaguely unhinged. Izuku knows that feeling all too well.

When Izuku gets back to his room, he jots down everything Kacchan said, and then he flips to a fresh page and starts a new entry.

Alias: Persevere, he writes across the top of the page. *Real name: Deku. Quirk: One for All.*

He sits back and takes in the way the names look together. Persevere. Deku. Both names mean the same thing.

Izuku's face hurts. He reaches up to touch his mouth and pokes around the edge of his grin. It feels too wide for his face. Izuku hadn't even realised he was smiling.

Relief. This feeling, warm like sunshine, that's taken route in his chest —it's *relief*.

All Might doesn't announce to the class that Izuku is invited to have lunch or coffee in the teachers lounge semi-regularly, but he thinks they know. When All Might sticks his head around the corner and wordlessly holds up his lunch, Uraraka and Iida don't even blink (though Todoroki does squint at Izuku for a moment, as though weighing him up, before turning back to his conversation with Shinsou).

"We'll see you in class, ribbit," Asui says.

"Maybe All Might wasn't talking to me. Maybe that was meant for someone else," Izuku mumbles, even as he picks up his lunch tray. They all level him unimpressed looks. Izuku goes red and half-jogs out of the cafeteria.

Izuku settles down on the couch across from All Might and picks his chop sticks back up. He reminds himself to return the tray to the cafeteria before class resumes. Last time, he forgot, and carried the tray into English class.

"How have you been, my boy?" All Might asks.

“Good.” There’s a pause. Izuku squints at All Might. “How have *you* been?”

“Good, I suppose.” All Might fiddles with his small container of strawberries. “This past week has been eye-opening.”

Izuku puts down his chopsticks. He has been wondering if All Might would want to talk about the time travel incident a few days ago. “All Might …”

“You amaze me, young Midoriya,” All Might says. “When you were a child, you knew immediately that there was something different about the heroes that saved you. When I was a child, I dismissed my run-ins with heroes as coincidence. It’s been decades and I’m only now learning the truth.”

“You grew up with time travellers, too,” Izuku says, “and one of them was Aizawa.”

All Might blows out a long breath that makes his bangs float up to his forehead. “Yes. I hadn’t realised until this week, but—yes. The strange masked heroes I encountered when I was a kid were time travellers. One of them was Aizawa. I should have realised. One of them used their quirk-nullifying power in front of me and everything.”

Izuku tries to picture Aizawa taking a young All Might out for milkshakes, the way his heroes occasionally did. He tries to imagine a young, naive All Might sitting across from Aizawa and pestering him with all kinds of questions about who he is and where he came from. The resulting image resembles a blond puppy harassing an adult cat too much for Izuku to keep a straight face. He takes a bite of egg to hide his smile.

All Might catches Izuku’s smile, anyway. “It’s alright. You can laugh at me.”

“No, no,” Izuku says. “I mean, it makes sense that you didn’t figure it out. My heroes didn’t wear masks. They wore their regular hero costumes. Some of them even told me their hero names. And then I started up at high school and I spent all day, every day, in class with them, looking at their familiar faces and familiar quirks and familiar mannerisms. I would have been blind not to have noticed it. It was harder for you.” Izuku scrubs a hand through his hair, embarrassed. “I can understand why Aizawa was annoyed. They didn’t even try and disguise themselves.”

“Aizawa does value stealth,” All Might agrees.

All Might talks about his childhood heroes, and although he didn’t spend the same kind of time with them as Izuku did, he can tell hear the undercurrent of fondness in All Might’s words. There’s regret, too. Izuku wonders if All Might wishes he had chased after the mysterious heroes, pestered them a little more, rather than taken things at face value. If All Might wishes he had the same relationship that Izuku has with his friends.

“It was lonely,” Izuku says in a lull in the conversation. “There was definitely fun moments, and I’m grateful that I got to meet them all, but it was lonely sometimes, too.”

“Aizawa wasn’t the only person that saved me,” All Might says. “Night-Eye volunteered, too. I didn’t know. I didn’t get the chance to thank him before—”

All Might cuts himself off. He sets his fruit down on the low coffee table. Izuku lowers his chopsticks, too. He doesn’t think either of them will be able to eat again during the lunch break.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku starts.

All Might shakes his head. He doesn’t say *it’s alright,* because it’s not. A hero—a friend—is gone.

“I knew him,” All Might says. “I’m grateful for that chance, at least. Aizawa passed on the contacts for some of the other heroes who saved me, too. I’m going to try and get to know them before it’s too late. Even if too much time has passed, even if they don’t want to be friends, it would be wrong not to thank them.”

Civilians don’t always thank their heroes. It’s not a selfless act, after all. Heroism is a job. Some people doesn’t believe it requires a thank you, the way people don’t thank paramedics for driving them to the hospital, or firefighters for putting out bush-fires, or teachers for carrying them through years of schooling. This feels different, somehow.

“Good luck,” Izuku says. “I hope you find them.”

All Might smiles. He looks tired, like he’s had trouble sleeping again, but his eyes crinkle up, and his teeth show, and some of the anxious energy fizzles out in Izuku’s stomach.

“Thank you,” All Might says. “I hope so, too.”

His classmates are gathered around the common room sofas. Homework is spread out in a semi-circle on the carpet. Hagakure is arguing with Jirou about the volume of the TV and proper places to do homework.

Todoroki is folded up in the armchair and scrolling through his phone like he’s deaf to the argument unravelling at his feet. Izuku hovers behind him, shifting from foot to foot. Todoroki looks up.

“Are you alright, Midoriya?” Todoroki asks.

Kirishima rolls onto his back, squashing his English homework under his shoulders. “Dude, come study with us!”

Jirou picks up a throw cushion like she’s going to ditch it at Kirishima. “I said to go do your homework at the table. Not in front of the TV.”

“It’s comfy here,” Hagakure says.

“Then don’t complain when people want to watch TV.”

“It’s too loud. I’m sitting right next to the speaker.”

“Then *move*.”

Uraraka puts down her phone and sits up. “Is everything okay, Deku?”

“Um.” Izuku’s voice comes out as a squeak. He rocks back on his heels, hands twisting and untwisting in front of him.

Everyone’s attention shifts from Hagakure and Jirou’s argument to Izuku. Todoroki shifts as though to stand and force Izuku into his armchair, but Izuku pushes him back down.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. I just—I wanted to say—” Izuku makes himself stand flat-footed on the carpet. He straightens his shoulders. “I want to say thank you.”

His classmates blink up at him. Even the few people at the table behind the couches are watching, now.

“You’re welcome, dude,” Kirishima says, “but … what did we do exactly?”

“You were there,” Izuku says. He briefly makes eye contact with Uraraka, and then looks away. Kacchan isn’t here right now. Uraraka is the only person here who could guess why Izuku is thanking this group of people, and even then, she can’t understand. Not really. Not at the moment.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Midoriya?” Ojiro asks from his place at the table.

“This sounds awfully troubling,” Tokoyami agrees. “Are you dying?”

“I’m sure Midoriya is not dying,” Iida says. Then pauses. “You’re not dying or planning on a suicide mission, are you, Midoriya?”

“You better not,” Jirou says. She looks as though she’s going to hurl the throw cushion at him, now.

Izuku flails his arms in the arm. “No, no! I’m not dying! I’m just thanking you for—for everything.”

“That sounds like a goodbye message,” Todoroki says.

“It’s not a goodbye message!” Izuku huffs out a sigh. “I’m just … grateful to have you all in my life. For being my friends. For saving me. For sticking with me when things got tough. Thank you. I wanted to say that at least once.”

Kirishima rolls off the carpet and sweeps Izuku into a hug. “That was so manly.”

When he sets him back down, Uraraka bounces over for a hug, too. A few of the others get up for a turn, like Iida, and Aoyama, and even Todoroki, who gives Izuku the briefest hug possible, and then turns away before either of them can see each other’s pink faces.

“Definitely not dying?” Jirou says, still holding up the throw cushion menacingly.

“I promise,” Izuku says.

She lowers the cushion, and then eyes him up and down, as though

looking him over for any sign of injury. She's a teenager, now, not that adult pro hero who was always a moment away from scrubbing her knuckles against his scalp, but she still gives off older sister vibes.

"Good," she says. "Sit down and watch Robot Wars with us."

"I'm doing homework!" Hakagure says, but Jirou just drags Izuku down so he's wedged between her and Uraraka, and turns the volume up as loud as it will go.

Their first year is almost over. Izuku is older now than he was eighteen months ago. He's a different person. He's done more; he's seen more; he knows more.

He approaches Aizawa after the final bell rings on the second last Saturday of semester. His classmates run out of the room as fast as they can. Izuku waves off Uraraka and Todoroki when they try to wait around for him.

"This will only take a minute," he tells them.

Aizawa is already half inside of a pale pink sleeping bag. He raises an eyebrow at Izuku.

"Sir," Izuku begins, fidgeting with his hold on his backpack. "Do you know if Shinsou will—"

"I can't discuss that with a student," Aizawa says.

Izuku wilts. "Right. I had a feeling you would say that. But the year is almost over, and Shinsou still isn't in this class, and I keep thinking, what if …"

"You're not going to change the timeline." Aizawa pulls his sleeping bag off and folds it under one arm. Izuku straightens his shoulders under Aizawa's serious gaze. "You're already well on your way to making the future happen. When you said you'd been affected by time travel, I knew you were going to be high-maintenance, but I hadn't that it'd be to such a high degree."

Izuku blinks. “High-maintenance?”

“Episodes of time travel are rare, and it only happens to high profile cases. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I haven’t told anyone,” Izuku begins.

“That’s not what I meant.” Aizawa leans back against the desk, not because he’s tired, but so that his eyes are level with his student’s. “Time travellers only come back in time because they think someone is worth killing or worth saving. Because that person has helped to shape the course of history and their death will warp the future drastically.”

“What are you saying?” Izuku asks.

Aizawa puts a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. He doesn’t do that often. “Midoriya, you had nineteen pro heroes save your life. You said many of them appeared more than once. Do you know how many attempted assassinations you experienced?”

Attempted assassinations. Izuku had only called them villain run-ins. Not assassinations. Never that.

“I lost count after thirty,” Izuku says.

“Over thirty,” Aizawa repeats. “Probably more. I’ve heard of top heroes experiencing attempted assassinations as a child, but it was never more than two or three times. Maybe half a dozen if they were at the very top of the ranks. Not thirty separate occasions. That is why I knew you were going to be high-maintenance. The best heroes always are.”

Izuku balls his hands into fists. He’s been asking *why me* for years. He’s wondered what his friends were keeping from him, how they kept finding him, why they would look at him with such familiar fondness, but not once did he count out the frequency of the villain attacks and equate it his own importance.

Izuku almost asks how many experiences with time travel All Might had, but his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He can’t get the words out, but Aizawa knows what’s thinking, anyway.

“From memory, All Might had twenty-eight cases of malicious time

travel," Aizawa says.

Twenty-eight. And Izuku had thirty—had lost count after thirty when he was eleven.

"Oh," is all Izuku manages.

Aizawa stands back up and scrubs a hand through his hair. "You've done so much this year. You're on your way to becoming the man that sent villains running into the past to take you out before you became too strong to fight—"

"The villains stopped becoming when I as fourteen," Izuku realises. "I thought—I don't know. I thought everything was coming full circle."

"They're all cowards who couldn't face you as an adult, so they went back to fight you as a kid. The things you've done in your first year at UA—they'll know about that, if they're digging into your past. They wouldn't risk facing you within a year of those events."

Izuku stares out at the rows of empty desks. For months, he had been picturing his classmates growing old beside him, becoming the heroes he had met as a kid. He hadn't thought about the future, when friends and villains would be doing that in reverse. Researching him. Seeing the younger Izuku after getting to know the older version of him, the hero Deku, either as his friend or his enemy.

Izuku scrubs at his face. "Sir, I came here to ask about Shinsou."

Aizawa throws his sleeping back over his shoulder and heads for the door. "You're the eye of the storm. If you stay on course, everyone else should, too."

It should be an overwhelming thought. Having so much influence on the future should frighten him, but—Izuku was written into history the moment All Might extended his hand and asked him to inherit his power. He will do this because of the dream burning up inside him. He will do it for All Might. He will do it for himself. Maintaining the timeline is a perk.

Aizawa stops in the doorway. "Shinsou's transfer will go through over the summer. Don't tell anyone. Not even Shinsou."

Izuku can't stop his smile. It feels too big for his face. "Yes, sir."

Aizawa nods, just the once, and disappears into the building, leaving

Izuku in the classroom alone.

Through the windows, he can see his friends racing to the dorms to get a head start on the weekend. He can see the entire campus from this angle, lit by the afternoon sun. He can see his future like a road map, spread out in front of him, boundless and full. He feels dizzy.

It's a good feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Bunny. The nickname that baby Bakugou first gave Deku was *Bunny*. Of course, Bakugou would rather die than let Deku know that.

I've written a redemption arc for Bakugou in my future verse, but when writing him as a teenager, I usually stick fairly close to canon in terms of how much of a bully he is. That doesn't make it right. He has a long way to go in terms of apologising to Izuku and growing as a person, and this fic is only the tip of the iceberg.

Also, deleted scene:

Aoyama: "I'm grateful that you invited me to sit with your group, Midoriya. I've been wondering how to befriend you for some time now—your idea was much better than mine."

Midoriya: "What was your idea?"

Aoyama: "Secret cheese message."

Midoriya: "…"

Thanks for reading! The next chapter will be a much shorter epilogue, unlike this beast of a chapter.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

> Izuku looks at the rest of them over the top of Uraraka's head. Their pale, exhausted faces shine back at him, familiar and nostalgic all at once.
>
> Izuku says, barely able to form the words, “Hello, again.”

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to all of my readers. The love I’ve received for this fic has been so humbling. I ended up re-writing this chapter half a dozen times before I was happy with the way it unfolded, but I never fully abandoned it because of all of your lovely comments.
>
> And thank you to @pulcheres on tumblr for beta-reading this chapter and encouraging my writing. Your support means the world to me.
>
> Readers of the ‘see it all in bloom’ series will recognise Bubblegum Blitz from ‘who lives, who dies, who tells your story.’ To everyone else: they are Izuku’s sidekick and goes by they/them pronouns.
>
> And to anime-only fans who were extremely confused last chapter about what exactly I meant by ‘cheese message’ in end notes: it’s a reference to Aoyama’s antics in Chapter 168 of the manga.

Izuku wakes to a haze of colour. He squints and it coalesces into a rainbow of bouquets and cards and stuffed animals. Twelve years after entering UA, waking up in the hospital doesn’t alarm him, but the emptiness of his room does. The vacant seats by his bed are more confusing than the blank space where his memory should be.

People don’t always flock to his bedside when he’s wounded. In his line of work, injuries are an occupational hazard, something most of friends and family face almost daily. But judging from the piles of gifts, the wilting flowers, Izuku has been in the hospital a while. Days. Maybe longer. He wasn’t just knocked around; whatever happened was serious.

The pain and wooziness keeps him from moving for a half hour, and

then curiosity wins out.

Izuku expertly pulls out the IV and pushes himself off the bed. His right side—from his ankle up to his collarbone—is splotched with deep purple bruises. There's a soft cast on his ankle. When he looks in the mirror later that afternoon, he'll find two neat rows of stitches across his temple and jaw.

He limps into the corridor. He doesn't make it far before a nurse stops him.

"Deku, sir," she says, caught between flustered hero worship and professionalism. "You shouldn't be up. You've been unconscious for several days and—"

"I'm sorry." Izuku is polite, but he has no intention of placidly laying back down and going back to sleep. "Do you know where my phone is? I need to contact my agency."

"I don't know, but you really need to let a doctor examine you."

"I'm alright" Izuku says. "I'm more worried about my friends and family. I need to speak with them."

Izuku pulls out the toothy smile he wears in front of panicked civilians, reporters, and nervous fans. That famous smile that says, *It's okay now.* If Todoroki were here, he would call Izuku manipulative.

But Todoroki isn't here. There's no evidence in his hospital room that Todoroki or his friends have been here at all. No stray jackets or shoes, no paper coffee cups or sandwich wrappers left in the bin, no spare pillows or blankets on the chairs. That's not normal. That has Izuku worried.

"Oh," the nurse says, like she's been punched in the gut. She blinks rapidly. "Yes, of course. I'll go have a look for you."

If Izuku had tried to bluff with just a smile more than five years ago, back before he reached Number One, he'd be quickly manhandled back into bed. But he's an old hat at this now.

Some of the sturdier medical staff won't be swayed by his reassuring smile, though. If he runs into anyone like that, they will browbeat him back into bed like he is any other patient and not the Symbol of Peace.

The nurse returns with his phone. There's a crack running down the

middle of the screen, but it turns on. There are over fifty messages waiting for him—from his mum and All Might, from coworkers and other acquaintances in the hero industry, all of them wishing him a speedy recovery. Old emails. Polite enquiries from reporters who should know better than to contact him on his personal phone.

There are no messages from his friends. The group chat for the old Class 3-A is silent. The last message, a meme that features Kacchan squinting at Kirishima's bright smile, sent by Kaminari, came over a week ago.

Something is very wrong.

He thinks about calling his mum, but he doesn't like her seeing him when he is so injured, even after all these years. And if he calls his agency, they'll tell him to stay where he is and recover fully, and that's not an option.

He calls his sidekick instead.

Bubblegum Blitz pulls into the car-park in a sleek agency car. Izuku slides into the passenger seat and they speed off before anyone can try and follow up with his hasty discharge.

Bubblegum has worked with Izuku since they were eighteen, fresh out of UA and still harbouring a devastating crush on the newly minted Number One. Thankfully, the crush eroded over time, but their petulance for indulging all of Izuku's whims stays. They're the only sidekick willing to bust him out of the hospital instead of escorting him back to bed.

"Gum," Izuku says, "what happened?"

"What do you mean?" Bubblegum says, pink fingers twitching around the steering wheel.

"I haven't heard from my friends in weeks, Gum. That's not normal."

“They wouldn’t let me be involved,” Bubblegum says, pulling at their fringe. It bounces back when they let go, like rubber. “I don’t know what they’re doing, but I know they’re helping you, so I’ve been assisting on the outside. Helping them explain their absences. Stuff like that.”

“Involved in what?” Izuku asks, a pit growing in his stomach.

Bubblegum is quiet as they drive. They stop in front of an apartment building in a suburb that sits between the city centre and the outer suburbs. A place away from business districts and families and schools. A place heroes could come and go freely without being questioned.

Izuku peers up at the brick building. Some of the windows are lit. Some are boarded up with cardboard or thin wood sheets.

“Bubblegum?” Izuku asks.

Bubblegum lets out a deep breath. “I wasn’t there when you were attacked. I’m your sidekick--I’m supposed to help and protect you, but I wasn’t even there. I tried to help Mind Blank with the arrest after you were hospitalised, but some of the villains got away. And then your friends came here. I don’t know why.”

Class 3-A have been accused of being too insular before. The hero industry is small and self-contained, and their group of twenty are even more so. But to purposely shut out Izuku’s sidekick …

“I think,” Bubblegum says, an unreadable look on their face, “that they’re doing something they aren’t supposed to, something not exactly legal, and they didn’t know if they could trust me with that secret.”

“Something like?” Izuku presses. When Bubblegum just shrugs, Izuku leans forward, ignoring the pain in his ribs. “Gum, please.”

“They’re trying to protect you,” Bubblegum says. “I don’t know how, but I’m sure—I’m positive that what they’re doing is to save you.”

Izuku thinks Bubblegum knows more about what his ex-classmates are doing than they will admit, which doesn’t bode well. They would only pretend to be this ignorant if his friends were doing something very dangerous and very illegal.

Izuku opens the car-door and staggers out. He’s limping into the

building before Bubblegum can stop him.

Izuku takes the elevator to the top floor. Shinsou would rent a room closer to the middle to be less conspicuous, but Yaoyorozu would take up the entire top floor without even thinking about it, and out of the two of them, Yaoyorozu is the more likely to find them a base as tactically perfect as this.

The elevator rattles to a stop. Izuku steps out.

He thinks he knows what this is. He knows where he's arrived—when he's arrived. He thinks he knew it instinctually the moment he opened his eyes and found himself alone in a flower-filled hospital room.

More than once, Izuku had thought he had reached the right time and had been disappointed. But everything about today has been odd—the strange, out of the way building; Bubblegum Blitz's crypticism; and the silence surrounding this entire case, from the media in regards to the villains that escaped Mind Blank's raid days after Izuku was hospitalised, to the lack of messages from his friends. Izuku knows that, when things stop adding up, it often means that his childhood friends are involved

Izuku takes a moment just to breathe, to brace himself, and then opens the only door not thinly coated in dust.

The large living room is unfurnished, aside from a handful of unmade futons, several messy duffle-bags that look as though people have been living out of them, and a garbage bag full of empty take-away containers.

A group of four are sat cross-legged in the middle of the room. Ingenium's dirt-streaked armour is scattered in pieces. Iida is attacking the chest plate with a scrub brush. The helmet is balanced in Ashido's lap and she's trying to chip off dried mud from around the eyes. Kacchan and Sato sit on Iida's left. Sato is half-way through a sandwich. Kacchan is eating healthy wheat chips by the handful.

It's just after noon, but it looks like a scene plucked right out of his hero agency in the early hours of the morning, when everyone is dusty and bone-tired and starving, just coming off nighttime patrol.

Izuku leans against the door, biting down his smile, and thinks, It's them.

"You already have a hero agency, Iida," Izuku says lightly. "Don't tell

me you're trying to set up a second one."

They all look up. Sato drops his sandwich. Kacchan shoves another handful of chips into his mouth, unbothered.

"Midoriya!" Ashido scrambles to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

Iida drops his chest plate and leaps over the rest of his armour, almost tripping on a glove, and scoops Izuku into a hug. Izuku winces and Iida quickly lets go.

"Are you alright? You should still be in the hospital."

"I'll be okay," Izuku says, letting Ashido give him a brief, careful hug. "Now, tell me: what happened? What is this place?"

Ashido's eyes go wide. Iida stiffens up like he's fifteen years old again and desperate to prove himself, and Sato finds the ceiling suddenly fascinating.

"Nothing," Ashido says.

"You're in an unfurnished apartment in your hero costumes in the middle of a weekday for no reason?"

"Uh," Ashido says. "Well."

They all look so tired and frantic, running on too little sleep and too much caffeine, and Izuku almost feels bad. And then he remembers a hundred fruitless google searches coming up with nothing; his friends vanishing around street corners as though they had never been there; the way they'd tussle his hair and laugh off his questions, plying him with ice-creams instead of answers.

"We did something," Iida begins. "We did something we maybe shouldn't have done, but I think I speak for everyone when I say we don't regret it."

"Something illegal?"

"We didn't exactly go through the proper channels," Sato says. "No one knows what we're doing."

"And what is it," Izuku says, "that you're doing?"

Kacchan crunches loudly on a wheat chip. The bag crinkles obnoxiously.

There's another long silence as everyone tries to think about how to say what they're about to say, before Ashido blurts, "We're time travellers."

"What," Izuku says.

"We can explain," Iida says quickly, shooting Ashido a look. "We did it to protect you."

And now, the question Izuku has been waiting to ask: "Why did you need to protect me?"

"Shinsou was investigating a group of villains," Iida starts, "with a serious grudge against the hero industry—but especially you, Midoriya, as our Symbol. One of them used to be a runner for the old League of Villains. He has a time quirk."

Izuku remembers this vaguely. Not the middle-aged man with the time quirk, but the villains banded together by their individual hatred towards him.

"They attacked me," Izuku recalls.

"You were kind of a boss, dude," Sato says, like he thinks Izuku's main concern is whether or not he looked cool while fighting the villains off. "You took most of them down, even if they did deal enough damage to land you in the hospital for a while."

"Shinsou helped organise a raid a few days later, but we didn't get them all. Redo—the runner with the time quirk—escaped but he left his plans behinds. Maps of your old neighbourhood, photos of you and Bakugou as children, your old elementary and middle school. We worked out fairly quickly that he was planning on sending people back in time to take you out and destabilise the entire hero industry."

"But the villains aren't the only ones who have a time quirk on their side," Ashido says. "We knew we couldn't find Redo before he started sending people back to hurt you, so we decided we'd meet them there and cut them off."

"You were hurt. You hadn't even woken up yet—there was no time to ask you what you thought of this or ask your permission," Iida says in a rush. "But—we couldn't just let him *kill* you, Midoriya."

Ashido peers at him, trying to gauge his lack of reaction. "Shouldn't you be more freaked out by this, Midoriya? We're *time travellers,*

now."

"Yeah," Izuku says, "I've always known that."

They blink at him. Through a mouthful of chips, Kacchan says, "You're fucking morons."

"What do you mean you *know?"* Ashido demands.

"I mean I *know*," Izuku says. "I've known my whole life, way before I met you at UA, before the villains even had the idea to go back in time. You're my childhood heroes. Of course I know who you are."

Ashido's mouth opens and closes. Iida closes his eyes like he's in pain. Sato puts his face in his hands and says, "Bakugou's right. We're morons."

"How did we forget that time travel works both ways?" Iida asks no one in particular.

"I think everyone's been too busy stressing over the thought of baby Midoriya getting murdered," Sato says.

"I wasn't a baby," Izuku says indignantly, "I was about nine when I met you."

Sato stares at him. "I haven't been sent back yet. Nine, really?"

They're not finished. Izuku hadn't expected that when he finally caught up to his childhood friends they would only be half-way done saving him.

Izuku cocks his head to one side, remembering the way he'd launched himself at Sato and clung, koala-like, to his shoulders. "Nevermind, then. You'll see soon enough."

Iida puts a hand on his shoulder and they share a smile, something secret and strained like the smiles exchanged on the battlefield. Kacchan rolls his eyes and leaves, going deeper into the apartment.

Sato keeps staring at Izuku like he's a math problem he can't figure out, which makes Ashido laugh and rock back on her heels.

"Guess who's back!" she calls, loud enough to echo through the closed side-rooms.

Kaminari comes out first, still in his pyjamas, his hair puffed out

around his head like a dandelion. He sees Izuku and makes a choked noise, half-cough, half-scream, and throws himself at him. He scrambles to steady Kaminari before he topples over.

“Midoriya,” Kaminari says, “you were such a cute kid. My heart can’t take it.”

Hagakure and Ojirou come running out when they hear Kaminari’s scream. Hagakure is brandishing a live taser, but she drops it when she sees Izuku. She shoves past Ojirou and jumps on top of Izuku, almost smashing into Kaminari.

“Deku! Honey, you were so cute,” she says with a squeal. Izuku winces and readjusts his two friends so that there are no elbows shoved against his damaged ribs.

Ojirou stares at Izuku. “You got tall.”

“I’m really not that tall,” Izuku admits. He’s average. Barely. At red carpet events and official photo-shoots, he tries to duck away from the giants in their class like Shoji so he doesn’t look even smaller than he is.

“But you were so little,” Ojirou says with wonder.

“Midoriya, you used to be *so small,”* Kaminari says, and he sounds like he might start crying.

Aoyama comes into the room next, his hair spotted white where his dry shampoo wasn’t entirely brushed out, foundation shiny under the apartment’s lights. Aoyama is not normally one for physical affection —he prefers to exchange blinding smiles and over exaggerated poses from across the way—but he jogs across the unfurnished living area and jumps onto Izuku.

“Mon ami, you are so smart! So brave! A bright little star!”

Izuku tries to untangle himself from the three bodies. They reluctantly pull away, and step back to give him some room, but then another wave of friends burst into the living room.

Kirishima and Sero almost barrel him over with the force of their hug. In contrast, Todoroki’s hug is achingly gentle. His unwashed hair is fraying out of its braid, but Izuku can still smell the phantom-scent of his apple shampoo.

When Todoroki pulls away, Izuku glimpses Shinsou flipping him off in the doorway. Uraraka almost knocks Shinsou over when she sprints into the room, ink smudged down one side of her face from where she'd fallen asleep on her notes. She launches herself at Izuku. He catches her around the knees and she clings, legs wrapped around his waist, keening into his hair.

Everyone is staring at him like they can't believe he's real, like they're seeing him for the first time, and the combined weight of their gazes makes his stomach swoop.

"I'm okay," he says, even though he's been struggling to walk without listing to one side since he woke up, and he thinks some of his stitches might be in danger of coming loose. "You guys are making sure I'm okay. Right?"

"I'm sorry you had to wake up in the hospital alone," Todoroki says.

"You were pretty messed up after the attack," Sero says. "We didn't know if …"

"'Course we knew." Shinsou is eating Kacchan's wheat chips, which he probably stole using his quirk. "You've been through worse. There's no way you wouldn't pull through."

Uraraka jumps down and stumbles back. Her eyes are rimmed red. "Deku, oh no. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Izuku hugs her again. "I'm okay, Floaty Girl."

She makes a little noise in the back of her throat and sags against him. He looks at the rest of them over the top of her head. Their pale, exhausted faces shine back at him, familiar and nostalgic all at once.

Izuku says, barely able to form the words, "Hello, again."

Everyone. Hello.

They end up gathered on the floor. Izuku is slumped against the wall, a futon under him, in deference to his injuries. Everyone gathers

around him in a circle, even Kacchan.

The person who has made all of this possible is asleep in a side-room. Izuku gets the sense that she's not very old, and she has been working endlessly for days to send Izuku's friends back in time. He desperately wants to meet her, but she deserves the chance to rest.

And it gives his classmates time to embarrass him without worrying about ruining her impression of him.

"You were *adorable*," Hagakure gushes. He thinks she might be whacking Ojirou in her enthusiasm, but he can't tell. "You had these big chubby cheeks and your hair was so curly and just—ah!"

"You were very cute," Todoroki says. "Very pink."

Todoroki laughs when Izuku blushes. He hopes Todoroki didn't work out that he had a hopeless crush on him when he was little, a crush that never really went away. He should be safe, he thinks. Todoroki seems oblivious to the fact that half of Japan is in love with him. Surely, he hasn't picked up on Izuku's feelings.

"You were so small," Uraraka says, "and you didn't recognise me, and you didn't even have a quirk to defend yourself. You were so trusting. It was …"

"Overwhelming," Todoroki finishes. "It was overwhelming."

"You thought it was overwhelming?" Izuku says. "The first time I walked into Class 1-A and saw you all, I thought I was losing my mind."

"No wonder you were so sweaty and weird those first few months," Kirishima says.

"Do you think we messed with the timeline?" Sero asks. "If we hadn't time travelled, then Izuku wouldn't have been a complete mess the first semester at UA."

"It's fine. I would have still been a mess even without having a class full of time travellers," Izuku says. His friends all nod in agreement. He decides not to feel offended by this.

They don't let him stay there for long. Iida calls Bubblegum Blitz to drive him back to the hospital, and Shinsou goes to wake the person sleeping in the next room. They can't afford to take breaks for longer

than a few hours.

“You haven’t been here, working non-stop, have you?” Izuku asks.

“We’re doing this in shifts,” Kirishima says, which explains the friends who are missing, off sleeping or patrolling or working to cover their upcoming absences. “It’s still pretty non-stop, and Iida tried to cover his agency’s paperwork while he was here and got so overwhelmed that he almost missed his turn a few times—”

“Kirishima, I believe you’re up next,” Iida cuts in loudly.

“He almost got sent back in his pyjamas,” Uraraka tells Izuku in a whisper.

Iida crosses his arms, petulant. “I managed to get my armour on.”

“Barely,” Izuku says, which makes Iida splutter. He keeps forgetting that adult Izuku has all of child Izuku’s memories.

Before they bustle him out of the door and into Bubblegum’s waiting car, Izuku snags Kacchan by the sleeve. He has a familiar helmet balanced under one arm.

“Shouldn’t I be here, too?” Izuku asks, low enough that only Kacchan hears him. “You’re also in danger.”

“We’re only here for you, you snowflake,” Kacchan says.

“Just me? But then …”

Kacchan shakes his head and shoves Izuku. He topples into Sato’s arms, who grabs him around the waist and starts to haul him to the door. Uraraka watches the manhandling from where she’s holding the door open.

“It’ll sort itself out,” Kacchan says. “The timeline always does. Don’t be such a fucking worrywart.”

“See you soon, Deku,” Uraraka says cheerily, before shutting the door in his face.

When Izuku had imagined catching up to his childhood friends, he hadn't thought about the transitional period between then and now. In his mind, he had envisioned two separate versions of his friends: the young gaggle of students, brimming with potential, and the capable grown-up heroes who were skilled enough to travel through time and repeatedly save him.

But no sudden change has overcome his friends. They don't look more grown up or skilled or serious than they had a few weeks ago. Izuku feels like he had when he woke up on his eighteenth birthday, finally an adult but feeling just as small and out of his depth as he had felt the day before.

His friends had undergone a slow and constant change, so gradual that Izuku hadn't noticed it, because at the same time, he had been growing up alongside them.

Izuku goes back to the hospital, cooperative for once, and even lets Bubblegum confiscate his phone (on Iida's orders). He couldn't get any work done, anyway; he has too much to think about.

He stares up at the ceiling. Changing his own past would bring too many risks, but Izuku wishes he could go and visit that lonely quirkless boy who didn't understand why his only friends kept leaving him behind.

He would hold his small hands, mottled with bruises, and say, *You'll be stronger than you could have ever imagined. They'll make you strong; and you'll make them strong.*

You're the missing piece, he will say. *It was always you.*

But he can't interfere with his past. There's a part of him that still grieves for that misguided kid, and he feels torn between a strange kind of protectiveness and forgiveness and hatred for how small and helplessness and ignorant he had been—but Izuku can't meddle in his own history.

He has to let his friends do that for him.

For the first time in months, Izuku waits until his Doctor gives him the all clear before leaving the hospital. She almost seems surprised when she walks into his room a week after he had first woken up and finds him still there, waiting patiently for a check-up. Obviously, she's dealt with pro heroes before.

He goes home after he's discharged and showers. He sheds his mangled hero costume, the clothes he had arrived at the hospital in, for an All Might hoodie and soft sweatpants, and then walks right back out again.

He picks up a dozen hot drinks from a cafe a few blocks down from the rented apartment. The barista doesn't complain about the large order or the way Izuku stuffs handfuls of sugar packets into his hoodie pocket.

After she has eased the trays of drinks into his arms, she pauses, caught between one moment and the next, and then blurts, "I'm glad you're okay."

Izuku is glad he forwent wearing a face mask. He smiles his Deku smile, and says, "Thank you."

"We missed you," she blurts, quickly turning red. "Japan misses you. Please know--our hopes are with you!"

Izuku remembers why he usually leaves the hospital as soon as he can. If he didn't think they would turn him away the moment he stepped into the lobby, he would already be at his hero agency.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Izuku says. "I promise."

He takes the rickety elevator up to the top floor. When he tries to walk into the apartment without knocking, Yaoyorozu almost decapitates him with her bo staff. Izuku ducks, the stack of trays clutched tightly to his chest. The bo staff whizzes through his curls.

"Oh, Midoriya!" Yaoyorozu drops the bo staff and helps him steady the drinks. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were an intruder."

"No, it's my fault. This is a secret base full of pro heroes; I should've known better than to walk in without letting you know I was coming."

Yaoyorozu takes a few trays from him and lets him inside the apartment. Jirou is sitting in front of a sprawl of notes, holding a cup of cold coffee. She looks moments away from hurling it at Izuku's head.

"You absolute bastard," she tells him.

Yaoyorozu puts the drinks down. "Kyouka, you could have told me he was behind the door! I could have seriously hurt him."

Jirou trades the cold coffee for a fresh cappuccino. "He deserves it after what he put us through. What were you thinking, Midoriya? Running at the villains as a weedy little preteen? You gave me a heart-attack."

Izuku staggers and falls beside her, shakily placing the rest of the trays down. "But … do you mean … you were the hero I saw as a kid? You're a time traveller?"

Jirou uncurls her legs and kicks him. Izuku topples over, laughing.

"Nice try. I know time travel works both ways, I'm not an idiot."

Jirou pilfers the sugar satchels from Izuku's pockets. She tears six open and pours them into her coffee while Yaoyorozu goes into the other room to tell everyone that he's arrived.

Asui is there almost immediately, stepping over the drink trays and ducking under Izuku's arm. She wraps herself around him, like a snake draped over sun-soaked rock. He laughs and returns her hug.

"Hey, Froppy."

Shoji and Tokoyami come next. Shoji's hug lifts him clear off the ground, and Dark Shadow seems just as—if not more—happy to see him as Tokoyami, curling around his neck and butting up against his ear like a cat. Todoroki hugs him, too, and says hello with such dazzling intensity that Izuku forgets what he was saying mid-sentence.

Asui selects one of the teas Izuku brought. She watches Izuku over the paper rim.

"Sato says he thought you were a scary child, ribbit," she says abruptly.

Izuku splutters. "Scary?"

“He says you tackled him.”

“Well, I was a diehard hero fan that kept running into heroes that no one else seemed to know anything about—heroes who wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“What were we supposed to say?” Jirou says. “Hi, we’re your friends from the future, don’t worry we’re here to save you?”

“Honestly, that would have helped a lot. Saved me years of stressing over the mystery.” What they’ve done—time travelling without alerting the appropriate authorities, breaking the law to do so—is big, but for his friends, it’s happened in the span of a few weeks. They don’t understand. Izuku scrubs a hand through his hair, suddenly shy under the combined weight on their stares. “You guys were my childhood. I had All Might, sure, but you were my heroes. My friends—my only friends—for ten years.”

Asui puts her tea down and hugs him. Jirou’s frown wobbles and her whole face goes soft.

Yaoyorozu says, gently, “It was our pleasure, Midoriya.”

Izuku feels himself going red again. He flails a bit. “I didn’t come here to say something like that, even if it is true—I came here with a purpose.”

Tokoyami cocks his head to the side. “A purpose?”

Asui is still leant against his shoulder, sipping her tea, and Dark Shadow is wrapped around his arm, gnawing at his fingers like he isn’t incredibly powerful and could take off Izuku’s arm easily.

“I’m here to invite you all to dinner,” Izuku says.

Inko pours all her worry into preparing for the upcoming dinner. Izuku had thought she had adjusted to his semi-regular stints in the hospital over the years. He had been wrong. Even now, a few years shy of thirty, sitting unchallenged at the top of the Hero Charts, she worries about him like he’s six years old again, quirkless and rambling

about imaginary heroes as if they were real.

At the end of the week, Shinsou and Bubblegum Blitz head another raid. They find Redo, burnt out from weeks of sending people hurtling through time, barely able to fight back. Two days after his arrest and the arrest of every other villain involved, Inko is sweeping Izuku's ex-classmates into the living room, where an extra dining table has been fitted to accommodate them all.

Uraraka bursts through the front door, panting as if she had sprinted up the stairwell, and scans the growing crowd. Her eyes lock onto Izuku, and then she's running again. Izuku scoops her up and lets her cling to him.

"I didn't want to leave you," she says into his hair. She's crying. Izuku starts crying, too. "You were just a kid, and I knew about all the terrible villain attacks that were coming your way, and I had to *leave you* there to deal with them on your own."

"I wasn't alone," Izuku reminds her. "I found you guys a few months after that."

Uraraka isn't the only one that cries that night. Inko tears up after every other introduction, and Aoyama ruins his mascara when she kisses him on both cheeks and thanks him sincerely for looking after her boy. He thinks Hagakure cries, too, but he can't prove it.

Todoroki finds him in the kitchen. "Are you healed now?"

"Pretty much," Izuku says. "I'm going back to work on Monday and—"

Todoroki pulls him into a crushing hug. One arm is around Izuku's waist, clutching at his shirt, and the other presses Izuku's head to his shoulder. Izuku can feel the shape of his slim fingers, buried in his curls.

"I could see you were hurting," Todoroki says, "but I couldn't do anything about it. I had to let you found me again, let you reach out to me at the sports festival. I wished I could have helped you the way you helped me."

"You did," Izuku says. "You saved me too, Shouto."

Izuku doesn't know how much time passes before one of them let's go and breaks the hug. A long while, he thinks.

Izuku is on the couch talking to Iida when Inko makes her way to Kacchan. He goes stiff and pink under her gaze. Kirishima stays by his side and charms Inko with his big smile and bigger muscles. He places a hand on Kacchan's lower back, and Kacchan, somehow, finds the courage to apologise for everything he has done.

"You were one of them, weren't you?" Inko says. "One of the heroes who saved Izuku?"

"He was," Kirishima says.

Inko lays a hand on Kacchan's cheek, and says, "You've been looking after my baby for years. You're okay, Katsuki."

Izuku has to look away from the open expression on Kacchan's face. It's too much.

After dinner, Shinsou, the unbelievable traitor, tells everyone not in the know about Izuku's nicknames for them all, and then sits back and laughs when they demand answers.

Sato stares vacantly at the wall. "Yellow Might? Midoriya. Why."

"This is why I just told him the truth, ribbit," Asui says.

Kaminari points at Iida, who's still trying to process *Almost-Ingenium*. "Iida gave us that big scary lecture about the sanctity of time travel!"

"That was rubbish," Asui says. "No offence, Iida."

"Almost-Ingenium," Iida says to Izuku. "Do you not think …"

"You made the Ingenium legacy your own," Izuku says quickly. "I just got confused when I was six and the only information I could find on you was your brother, who looked so much like you but was clearly not you. Do you know how stressful that was?"

"How come Momo got such a cool name, though?" Jirou demands. Yaoyorozu fiddles with her ponytail, visibly pleased.

"No," Uraraka says, sing-song, "I think Todoroki definitely got the best name."

"He was so taken with you when he was little," Inko says. "He used to insist that his drawings weren't an accurate representation of how pretty you were."

Todoroki blinks and makes a sound like a computer rebooting itself. Uraraka slams her hands down on the table and demands, "*Drawings?"*

And that's how Izuku ends up in his childhood room with nineteen of his once-childhood heroes vying for space. He pulls out journal after journal and lets them pass them around. He's torn between an odd mix of horrified embarrassment and pride at seeing them get so excited about his childish scribbles and anecdotes and theories, touching the crayon drawings with something like relevance.

Todoroki slides up to Izuku while everyone is caught up in an argument about who has the best drawing.

"Midoriya," he says, and then wets his lips, pulls on the sleeves of his sweater. "Izuku. Your drawings …"

Izuku flails a hand in the air. "Ah, sorry! I didn't mean to embarrass you or make things weird. I guess I couldn't help myself from drawing you all when I was little."

"No," Todoroki says. "I wanted to ask: can I have a copy of my pages? I want to frame them."

"You want to *what?"*

Every time the journals make their way to Kacchan's corner of the room, he quickly passes them on. He was the first person out of this group to see these pages. There are still gaps in the books, frayed edges left as evidence from where Kacchan tore out entire pages or threw the journals around, playing keep away with Izuku's belongings.

Kacchan was the first person to see this journals later on, too, when Izuku confronted him in his dorm room. Izuku was the first person to see Kacchan's drawings, too.

When Kacchan looks up and meets his eye, Izuku smirks. His eyes say: *Wait until they realise that you have drawings, too.*

Kacchan scowls. *Don't you fucking dare. I showed you that in confidence, you bastard.*

And Izuku laughs because they both know that, after Izuku has gone back in time, he won't hesitate before enthusiastically telling the entire class about Kacchan's drawings.

The news doesn't cover the jail break. Time travel quirks don't get mentioned in the public sphere; Izuku would never have known that Redo existed, if he hadn't spent his childhood chasing after heroes that everyone else thought were imaginary.

The text message comes Wednesday morning when it is still dark and Izuku is just sneaking back into his apartment after an easy nighttime patrol.

Group Chat: Aizawa's Angels

Mind Black: Redo has escaped. We think he's sending another group back.

Mind Black: Meet at my apartment in 20mins.

Mind Blank: We're jumping.

Izuku brushes his teeth and changes out of his sweat-crusted suit. He grabs his spare suit and an older version of his mouth guard and mask, one that extends up past his forehead and into his curls, and runs back out the door. Sleep can wait.

Because it's so early in the morning, only a handful of people arrive at Shinsou's apartment. Most of his ex-classmates are either asleep, or working, or live too far away to make it to an impromptu meet up.

It's been awhile since Izuku has been to Shinsou's apartment. When a preteen with white hair and slitted pupils opens the door, Izuku thinks he has the wrong address.

"Sorry," Izuku says, taking a step back, "I must have made a mistake __"

Shinsou peers over the top of the girl. "What did I say about opening the door on your own?" He shoos the kid out of the way and then

opens the door wider to let Izuku in. “Sorry. She’s kind of a fan. I have no idea why, but—”

The girl glowers up at Shinsou, still-half hidden behind him. “Hitoshi, it’s *Deku*.”

Shinsou gently shoves her back into the living room. “He’s the Number One, I think he can take an old friend poking fun of him.”

“I’m honoured,” Izuku says, and smiles when Shinsou glares at him. Standing together like that, with their strangely coloured hair and matching scowls, they could be father and daughter.

Kirishima bounces through the open front door, ignoring both Shinsou and Izuku in favour of the kid. “Hey, T! How are you?”

The girl’s hard stare melts away. She turns shy and quiet under Izuku and Kirishima’s gaze.

“I’m fine,” she mumbles. She peeks at Izuku, as though checking to see if he’s still there, and then reddens and ducks into the hallway and out of sight.

“Did I scare her off?” Izuku asks.

“No, she’s just shy,” Shinsou says. “I told her she was invited to your dinner party a few weeks ago, but she didn’t want to come. It would’ve been too much for her, I think.”

“I was a shy kid, too,” Izuku says. “I understand.”

Shinsou snorts, like he doesn’t believe that. But then, Izuku had never really been shy around his heroes.

“It doesn’t help that she’s a big hero fan, or that you’re her favourite, Midoriya. It’s weird having posters of you in my apartment, even if it is just in her bedroom.”

“Her room?” Izuku repeats. “You adopted her?”

“No,” Shinsou says.

Jirou sticks his head out of the kitchen. “He totally did,” she says. “Hey, Midoriya, Kirishima. Where’s Bakugou?”

“Working,” Kirishima says. To Izuku, he says, “That was Traverse. Shinsou says he’s just looking after her until he can finalise her entry

into UA, but really, he's basically adopted the kid. It's sweet."

Shinsou opens and closes his mouth. Finally, he manages to choke out, "Her parents are vile, and she could be exploited if anyone finds out how strong her quirk is, and I'm not about to let a kid with that much potential slip through the cracks, let alone live on the streets."

"Softie," Jirou heckles.

Ashido slips through the front door. She's wearing a denim jacket over her pyjamas, and holding her hero suit and something laminated rolled into a tube.

"Where's my favourite little hero?" she says without saying hello to her old friends clustered in the entryway. She glances around and when she doesn't see a head of white hair, she hollers, "Traverse, get in here. I've got presents!"

Shinsou tries to hush her and remind them all that he has neighbours, until Jirou snorts, and says, "Is that another Deku poster?"

"The biggest one I could find," Ashido says.

"You didn't," Shinsou says flatly.

Ashido manoeuvres around them and jogs deeper into the apartment, Deku poster held aloft like a baton. "I absolutely did. I'm going to try and convince her to hang it up in the living room."

Izuku makes a choked sound in the back of his throat, unable to form proper syllables. Shinsou says, "Don't you fucking dare."

Ashido disappears around the corner, and Shinsou runs after her. Jirou snickers and follows them.

Kirishima looks unbothered by this. He shuts the door, takes off his shoes, and asks Izuku, "Would you like coffee? I'm going to go make some for everyone. Maybe that will wake us all up."

Standing in Shinsou's cramped kitchen beside Kirishima, listening as Kaminari and Sero's voices are added to the disaster going on in the living room, Izuku cannot help but wonder what it was like for his classmates going back the first time around.

Were they scared to time travel for the first time? Where did they first meet—here, in Shinsou's small apartment, all twenty of them

attempting to crowd into the living room; or was it in the dusty rented out apartment, their voices echoing through the unfurnished rooms; or was it somewhere else? A hero office? Somewhere secluded on the outskirts of town, like Izuku had always imagined?

“Everyone’s so relaxed,” Izuku wonders, as Ashido picks Traverse up and carries her through the apartment. She looks a lot smaller bracketed in Ashido’s muscled arms. When Ashido parades her through the kitchen, she gets overwhelmed by Izuku’s presence once more, and hides her face in Ashido’s shoulder.

“No,” Kirishima says, laying out mugs on the counter, “they’re not. Not really. Traverse is scared of her quirk. Shinsou says there hasn’t been a documented case of anyone having a time-related quirk anywhere near as strong as her’s. Most of the time, it’s too difficult to send people back a few months, let alone years, and Traverse can send us back over two decades.”

“But what about—” Izuku begins.

“Redo uses multiple quirk-boosting drugs. I think he’s just trying to send as many people back as he can before he overdoses.”

“God,” Izuku says.

“Yeah,” Kirishima says.

“Is she going to be okay to send us back?”

“She can do it without breaking a sweat,” Kirishima says. “Shinsou says that she once accidentally sent someone back fifty years. One day, she fought back against a bully and he just disappeared. A week later, the same kid tracked her down. He wasn’t ten anymore. He was an adult and almost sixty years old.”

Kirishima balances the mugs on a tray and takes them into the next room, leaving Izuku to his thoughts. Kirishima had seemed off all morning. While their friends were bounding around the apartment and playing with Traverse, Kirishima had been quiet. Reserved. It tells him just as much about why they’re here as Shinsou’s messages had.

Once enough people have arrived, they move into the office. The space has been transformed—all the furniture has been moved out, photos and notes taped to the wall, and in the middle of the room, a rug with pillows has been laid down. It looks like they’re preparing the space for a sleepover-cum-study session, not to travel back in time.

They settle down in a circle, cross-legged, and then Shinsou starts: "We don't think they're going after Midoriya again. That was a planned mission. This is spontaneous. And this time, they know that we're monitoring Midoriya's childhood. They know attacking him again won't work."

"Then why are we here?" Jirou asks.

"I said they weren't targeted Midoriya," Shinsou says. "I didn't say they weren't planning an attack at all." Kirishima's hold tightens on his mug. "We think they're going after Bakugou."

"Killing off the Number Two Hero would damage the timeline, too," Traverse says shyly. "And maybe it would destabilise Deku's role as the Symbol of Peace."

"They grew up together," Sero realises. "If Bakugou is killed as a kid, then it would seriously impact Midoriya emotionally."

"There's no maybe about it," Izuku says. "If Kacchan is killed before I start at UA, I wouldn't be a hero. I'd be a total stranger."

"Yeah," Kirishima says in that same flat tone he's been using all morning, "me too."

Izuku looks around the circle. The people here are the ones Kacchan had mentioned: Ashido with Traverse half on her lap, Kaminari trying valiantly to stay awake, and Sero, and Jirou, and Izuku, and Kirishima, glaring down at his mug like it has personally wronged him.

Izuku had imagined that, before they time travelled again, they would have held a class-wide meeting and the six of them would have volunteered to time travel again. They're the six people who are closest to Kacchan, after all. It makes sense.

He never thought that the six of them would be chosen randomly, by fate. If Uraraka was awake, if her phone wasn't on mute, she would be here, and Floaty Girl would have been a part of Kacchan's childhood. If Iida didn't work early in the morning, then Kacchan would have been squinting at the computer monitor, trying to rectify the differences between Ingenium and the hero who saved him, just like Izuku had.

If the text had come any earlier, when Izuku was still on patrol, then his phone would have stayed in his locker, unchecked, and Kacchan

would never have met the green-suited hero who never gave up.

That thought horrifies Izuku.

A small, inexperienced Kacchan is somewhere out there—sometime out there—with no way of defending himself. Is this how his friends felt, going back, realising that the hero they had stood beside for years was now a vulnerable child? He understands why some of them were so rattled when they first met him.

“We’re not going to let anything happen to him,” Sero says, laying a hand on Kirishima’s shoulder.

“It’ll be alright,” Traverse says bravely, glancing from Kirishima to Izuku, “because you’ll be there.”

Kirishima blows out a breath. Izuku balls his hands into fists, and says, “We can do this.”

Traverse falls into a sleep-like trance, seeking out Kacchan and the disturbances in the timeline. Izuku wonders just how powerful she is. She’s still in middle school. How powerful will she become?

Shinsou looks around the circle. “Is there anything anyone needs to say before we go back?”

Izuku looks at Jirou and Kirishima. He almost opens his mouth to warn them about tumbling onto UA’s campus and getting caught. Don’t disrupt the timeline, Aizawa had said. Izuku closes his mouth.

When no one speaks up, Shinsou pulls out a tub of what looks like wristwatches—black with no clock face. He hands them out to the group. Everyone takes one silently. There is no teasing, now. The play-fighting from earlier is a thing of the past.

Izuku fastens the wristwatch. It hums against his skin as though it’s alive. The screen on the front lights up. It gives him information on disturbances in the timeline, and a direct feed with Shinsou, and the date, shining at the very top of the watch.

“Okay,” Shinsou says. “Who wants to go first?”

The jump is seamless. Traverse lays her hand on Izuku's forehead like a baptism, and closes to her eyes. Her fingers warm against his skin. Static runs down his spine, and then the quiet chatter in Shinsou's apartment gives way to the distant sound of traffic and children playing. Izuku opens his eyes. He recognises this street. He grew up here. He would take this path to school everyday when he was little.

He checks the date on the watch. He's twenty-one years in the past.

Izuku follows the tracker in the watch until he reaches a familiar stretch of bushland. The villain half-hidden in the trees is drunk off the power of facing someone who can't fight back, and doesn't even realise the Symbol of Peace has broken out into a sprint behind him.

One for All propels him off the ground and he kicks the villain deeper into the bush. The villain gets back up. Izuku grabs him around the collar and flips them both through the air, landing with the villain pinned beneath him. He secures handcuffs around his wrists, and slots a muzzle loosely around his mouth to stop him from saying anything incriminating.

"Wow."

Izuku touches his mask, reassuring himself that his freckled face is hidden by it's outdated fit, and then turns around.

Kacchan is sprawled against overgrown tree roots. His face is scuffed with dirt and he's holding his All Might backpack like a shield. From the date, from Izuku's own faded memories, he knows that this Kacchan is six years old.

Kacchan scrambles to his feet. His small face shines up at Izuku. The wide, vague eyes, the open mouth—this is the way Kacchan used to look at All Might. Why is he looking at Izuku like that?

"Are you a pro hero?" Kacchan asks.

"I am." And then, without even thinking about it, Izuku asks, "Would you like to be friends?"

Kacchan stares at him. He doesn't blink. He barely breathes. For one moment, despite knowing what he does about the future, he thinks Kacchan can see right through him. He thinks, just for a second, that this tiny, inexperienced Kacchan will look him up and down and say, *No*.

"Yeah," Kacchan says finally. He takes a deep breathe, and balls his hands into fists, and rocks forward, the way he always used to stand when confronting upperclassmen, and blurts, "Can I have your autograph?"

"You … you want my—"

"You took down that villain like it was nothing. He didn't even know you were there before—*bam!* He was down."

Kacchan laughs and jumps up and down, almost tripping on the uneven ground. It's been so long since he's has seen Kacchan's unfiltered joy. Izuku can't help the laugh that bubbles up his throat, the smile that spreads beneath the mask.

This is the same stretch of bushland where they used to go looking for beetles. This is where they first founded the Bakugou Katsuki Hero Agency. Here, through those stretch of trees, Froppy saved him from drowning. This is where Izuku say Floaty Girl and Ice Prince for the very last time.

The bushland is smaller than the remembers. But then, so is Kacchan.

"My name's Bakugou Katsuki," Kacchan declares. "I'm going to be a hero just like you when I grow up!"

Kacchan rifles through his backpack and pulls out an exercise book and a coloured pencil. He holds them up to Izuku expectedly.

Izuku takes the book and pencil like they're made of finely spun glass. His hands look enormous next to Kacchan's.

Carefully, Izuku writes out: *Katsuki,*

I look forward to working with you one day. You'll be a better hero than you know.

Like Uraraka and Todoroki and the other heroes that have come before, Izuku signs it simply, *Your friend.*

End Notes

What started out as a fun one-off idea spiralled into my longest bnha fic yet. This thing has *chapters*. Who am I.

My tumblr.

EDIT: Art by mintystea on tumblr!

Baby Izuku seeing older!Uraraka and Todoroki for the first time

Older!Jirou being astonished by this child's lack of self-preservation

Older!Bakugou calling his classmates morons

Works inspired by this one

self saving traveler by Anonymous, I know, I'll know (that you were my future, and I was your past) by placesinfive

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!